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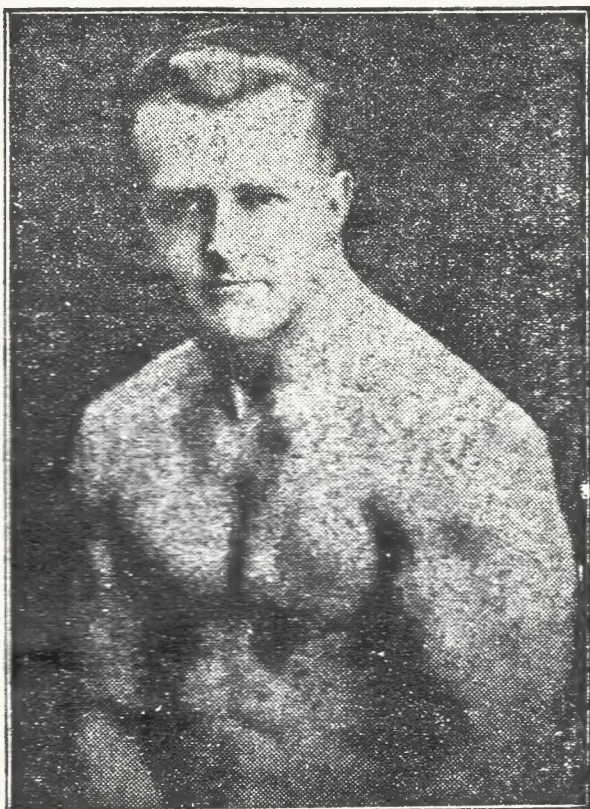
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The Golden West Magazine

TOM CHADBURN, *Editor*

Vol. IX

NOVEMBER, 1930

No. 3

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"Jim!" she exclaimed..

So then I
told Marge how
the Hawaiian Guitar
had made my ambi-
tions all come true



*"why didn't you tell
me that before ?"*

I WAS just a plain dis-
couraged "wash-out." No tal-
ent, no friends. No "social pres-
ence," no worthwhile pros-
pects at my job; no hard, solid
cash salted away at the bank.

And then what could a girl
see in me? No matter how
much I thought about girls—
the way I felt about Marge, for
example—I couldn't do any-
thing about it.

One night I tried reading a
magazine. I began spinning the
pages past my thumb.

And THEN it Happened!

Somehow one page flashed
out from the rest. "Learn the
Hawaiian Guitar at Home," it
read. And it urged me to send
for a Free Book. That was
three months ago.

Now let me tell you about
the other night.

I asked Marge if I could
call. She told me to come over
after supper. Excited? I'll say
I was!

Marge came out in a few
minutes. I couldn't restrain
myself any longer.

"Marge!" I cried, "I've got a
surprise for you!" I reached
down and lifted up my Guitar.
Even in the semi-darkness I
could see Marge's eyes grow
big.

I played to her. Dreamy
"Aloha"; throbbing "Carolina
Moon"; all the blues of "Moan-
in' Low"—and two others.
When I stopped, Marge didn't
say a word for a full minute.

Then she exclaimed excited-
ly, "Jim! Why didn't you tell
me before?"

I swallowed hard. "Be-
cause—" I began, "because,
Marge—well, I guess there
wasn't so very much to tell—
'before.'

"But now," I rushed on—
"I'm started for the biggest
things that ever were opened
up to me! Listen, Marge! I've
done it at home, without a
teacher, by a wonderful new
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Guitar at the 'Y.' They went
wild, Marge! Paid me ten dol-
lars for it.

"Since then I've played at
two dances there, too, and
Johnny Farrell says I start with
his orchestra the first of the
month. Think of it! It will
mean doubling my salary."

Marge was quiet again. Then
looking at me with level eyes,
she said—"Jim, you've found
yourself. I didn't know it was
in you. I'm so happy."

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The Gunner of Gold Bar

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

Claim-Jumpers dynamite their way to failure.

CHAPTER I

THE HOLDUP

YES'M, the next stop'll be Spider Creek, jest beyant that thar pertrudin' shoulder er hill yonder," vouchsafed the old stage driver, Clay Tobin, desperately juggling a cud of cut plug on a gulping Adam's apple and swallowing it frantically.

Old Clay hoped his extremely fair young woman passenger hadn't been noticing his surreptitious expectorations through the broken corner of the windshield. He'd heard that the fair sex tolerated a great deal these days. It had even been reported that some of the wilder ones actually rolled and smoked their own pills. Old Clay didn't believe anything like that.

Old Clay hadn't been outside in years, and if there were goings on of that nature, he didn't want to have it proved to him. Scraggly old hill-billy that he was, he had an aloof and respectful faith in womankind.

So, while he was sure it would make him sick at his stomach, he swallowed his long chaw rather than risk another shot at the windshield with the wide, innocent blue eyes of Jud Harmon's homecoming daughter fixed upon him.

"An' that's the end of the line, as I remember it," added a remarkably lazy voice, all the sharp corners smoothed off by a decidedly southern accent. "Have to pack in from there to Gold Bar, I believe."

"Texan," allowed old Clay to himself, quickly appraising the owner of the voice. "Or maybe Arizona. Looks danged familiar, an' he's quick, too."

"Yes—I know—I'm going home, up Sawyer's Chute way—you see, my father lives there," said the girl, giving the young man a quick, bright smile.

Apparently she had not previously noticed him. In fact, his grave, lean face with its square-cut jaw, and the hint of years of tan that city bleaching had not succeeded in eradicating, had been mirrored in the corners of her deceptively unseeing eyes for a matter of twenty miles or more.

"Yeah," stated old Clay quickly, seeing himself being cut out of the conversation. "This is Helen Harmon, Jud Harmon's gal, ef yuh hain't 'quainted in these parts."

The girl's lips parted slightly. Anyone could see that the informal introduction which seemed forthcoming would not be unwelcome.

"Yes?" responded the young man, seeing that it was up to him to say something. "Pleased to meet you."

Old Clay, being a natural born observer and reader of character, saw the young man's underlip tighten. He couldn't hear, but he knew that the teeth behind that lip had clicked shut, for the square jaw grew suddenly tense.

"H'm!" mused old Clay under his breath. "Now whadda'd yuh make o' that?"

For the young man had turned his

gaze squarely away from the girl, leaving her friendly, expectant smile flat on the very verge of acknowledging the introduction. He hadn't said who he was. He hadn't added a word to the grudging "pleased to meet you."

His manner indicated plainly enough he was not picking up an acquaintance with any young woman on a mountain stage, at least not with Jud Harmon's daughter.

Although the indigestible tobacco had made him a little sick, old Clay could not repress a chuckle. In the windshield mirror he had one glimpse of the girl's wide blue eyes. As the smile died, two glinting sparks flashed from pupils that contracted to black pinpoints.

Old Clay jammed his boot down on the accelerator. The wheezy motor racketed into protesting action. The ramshackle touring car that had once been a fancy seven-passenger turnout on some city boulevard in the days when such old timer touring cars had been stylish, shook and shivered its way up the rocky grade.

It would have been difficult to determine whether the temperature in the seat immediately behind the driver was at freezing or at the point of fiery spontaneous combustion. Old Clay kept his boot hard on the gas.

In the rear seat, behind Helen Harmon and the amazingly exclusive young men, two men, equally pudgy of face and paunch, and well dressed, nudged each other. One leaned forward, touching the girl's shoulder.

"You said Mr. Harmon was your father?" he queried.

"Oh, yes," replied the girl quickly, as though glad of the interruption. "Do you know him?"

"Yes, indeed," exclaimed the men. "I should say we do. We're headed for Sawyer's Chute ourselves. This is Mr. Morgan. I'm Mr. Shaffroth. We're glad to—we'll be pleased enough to be riding in with you from Spider Creek. In fact, we were wondering if

we could hire a guide. It's our first trip up in these hills."

"Oh, that will be fine," agreed the girl instantly, a malicious, little quirk at the corner of her mouth next to the silent young man. "I know every foot of the way, an' I'm expectin' dad may be down to meet me, although I didn't say for sure just when I would get here."

"Well," said the pudgy stranger, "he was expecting us, too, but we had no way of getting word when we would be here either."

"Then you're going to our—"

THE girl's words were cut off by the two sharp snapping cracks, as though two tires had blown out almost together. The front wheels of the ancient stage instantly developed a bumping effect that jolted the passengers in their seats, and threatened with a crablike motion to pull the nose of the old car abruptly into the sheer rock wall of the narrow, trail road.

"Who-ah! Dang yuh!" yelled old Clay, tugging frantically at the steering wheel, almost pulling the rim from its spokes. "Holdup! By—by gingerbread! Hi'ya! Whadda yuh think yer doin'?"

This last was addressed to the tall figure that seemed to appear from nowhere, in reality stepping from a waterworn fissure in the wall of the gray cliff. The man held a Colt's pistol of an old-fashioned, long-barrel pattern with a seeming carelessness that bespoke the practiced gunman.

His movement was quick and decisive, and through holes cut in a crude handkerchief mask his eyes glinted alertly.

"Get your hands up! Quick! No foolin', an' away from that pocket!"

The command was directed with crisp precision at old Clay, whose hand was dropping toward the side pocket of the car door. The driver knew the real thing when he heard

it, and as the asthmatic motor clunked and died with a groaning hiss, he reached for the ragged top.

The bandit had no need to repeat his order for the benefit of the pudgy pair in the rear seat. Before old Clay had lifted his hands, they were trying to outdo each other getting their own high over their heads.

Helen Harmon, being seated on the side which the holdup was approaching, neither raised her hands nor seemed greatly alarmed. If anything, it might have been noted that her eyes sparkled with an interested hopefulness, as though she already were relating this thrilling tale to some of her classmates.

A faint wisp of smoke from the muzzle of the loosely held Colt's solved the mystery of the twin explosions. The bandit had employed the most effective known means for halting a motor vehicle. He had shot one of the front tires, and in this he had been a splendid judge of cause and effect.

If the bullet had pierced the left-hand tire, the stage likely would have plunged over the precipice on that side of the narrow road. Had that happened, it would have landed a few hundred feet below where the blue and white waters of the Klamath river raced over the rocks and the scattered bars.

"Carryin' the mail, ain't yuh?" inquired the bandit, voice calm and drawling. "Would you be so kind, miss, as to reach over an' dump that mail sack over this side?"

This last was addressed to the girl.

"Indeed, I'll do nothing of the sort," was the instant reply in a tone that sparkled defiance and scorn. "I'll—"

The young man who had so strangely rebuffed her had suddenly crouched low in his seat. One hand with a grip that made her wince with pain fastened on the wrist next to him.

"Keep quiet," came a whisper that

could not be heard outside the stage. "Let him get it—see—"

Helen Harmon was quick to grasp the situation.

The young man beside her had slipped low in the seat at the first crack of the bandit's pistol. The girl could tell that he was in such position as to be below the desperado's range of vision.

And, as he caught her wrist, she saw that he had opened a satchel at his feet with the other hand. From it he was taking a competent looking automatic pistol.

"Heard o' you," came from the bandit. "Reckon you're Jud Harmon's girl. Won't trouble you, Miss Harmon. I'll be comin' around an' liftin' it myself."

He started circling the front of the stage, the long-barreled Colt's remaining in an undeviating line with old Clay. The bandit apparently was not worrying about the men in the rear seat. Anyway, their fat, white hands were plainly in view.

That he had not seen the man beside Helen Harmon was apparent. And the latter was slowly bringing the automatic pistol to the level of the seat back in front of him. Once the bandit had passed around the radiator and climbed over the fender crushed into the rocky cliff, he would be in direct line with the weapon.

Old Clay had started to speak, had seen in the mirror the maneuver of the young man behind him and had closed his thin lips grimly over his scraggly teeth. He was pretty sick from the tobacco he had swallowed, but he was thinking he would begin to feel better in about two shakes.

Careful that his climbing between the stage and the hill did not give the driver opportunity for a grab at the side pocket gun, the bandit slid down to the running board. He reached over the front door toward the mail sack on the seat beside old Clay.

As the desperado's hand reached

in, the young man with the automatic stiffened his crouching attitude, brought his pistol just under the edge of the seat back in front of him. All of his own body still was concealed, protected somewhat by the worn cushion before him.

Colt's held ready in one hand, reaching with the other for the mail sack, the bandit apparently did not notice that his handkerchief mask had slipped a little to one side. It revealed a square contour of jaw that a few days' reddish beard did not altogether hide, and just under his ear a small scar in the exact shape of a triangle.

Helen Harmon's lips were slightly parted, breathless, her whole attitude tense with waiting. So closely had the scared men in the rear seat been watching the stage robber, it is doubtful if they had even taken note of the action of their fellow passenger with the pistol.

Involuntarily, old Clay's right hand came down as the bandit's hand touched the mail sack. The girl gasped. The desperado's movement with his pistol had been quick. She was sure he was about to shoot the driver. Instead, he rapped old Clay sharply across the wrist with the barrel of his gun, bringing a groan.

Now. Oh, why didn't the man beside her shoot? The girl was afraid she would faint with the excitement of waiting, although she didn't remember ever having fainted. What was delaying him?

A sudden quick motion. A thud in the open bag at the young man's feet. The automatic pistol had been dropped. The young man himself had come into the bandit's view quickly. Helen Harmon hardly believed her eyes.

Whitefaced, jaws working a little, the young man who a second before had held all the advantage, who could have shot the stage robber in his tracks, was staring straight at the bandit. And the robber himself, at

first jerking his pistol around at the unexpected appearance of the other from behind the seat, stood there staring with equal intentness at the passenger who had been hidden.

The only words spoken came from Helen Harmon.

"Why—you—you coward!" she hissed at him between clenched teeth. "You—you quitter."

The young man, hands still lifted high, seemed not to have heard her. His gaze remained fixed on the bandit's half unmasked face.

CHAPTER II

THE BANDIT'S ALLY

ONLY Dan Timmons and the bandit with the scar under his ear knew why he had dropped that pistol. From the gray eyes of one to the gray eyes of the other was asked a wordless question. The eyes behind the mask did not answer. They only twinkled faintly.

"You miserable coward!" repeated the girl contemptuously in Dan Timmons' left ear. His ear may have gone a little red, but that was all the sign given that he was aware of her words.

In the moment of pause while the gray eyes questioned and challenged, the only sound was the break of white water in the Klamath river a few hundred feet below the perilous stage road. Around the next jutting shoulder of the mountain, as the stage driver had said, Spider Creek sprawled over the sides of the canyon through which ran Gold Bar river.

Spider creek, the stream, came into the canyon there, winding with the fantastic weblike deviation in spouting cataracts that had given it its name. Behind the stage along the narrow, shelf-like road it had followed, it was more than ten miles to the nearest settlement.

Few car drivers passed over that road. When a car or the stage started from either Spider Creek or the other

settlement on the Klamath ten miles away, the telephone was used to make sure no other car was coming in the opposite direction. In the ten miles there was no spot on the shelf which gave room for cars to pass.

Dan was fairly sure the bandit had not come to that spot from Spider Creek. Rather, he must have followed the dim trail over the flats of Cougar mountain directly from Gold Bar, several miles up the river above Spider Creek.

A rugged country this, one of the last of the almost untouched wildernesses of the West. A heartbreaking region, marked by the monuments of piled rocks and rubble at each bend of the Klamath, each monument in itself a past history of grisled, bearded men who had laboriously worked each bar for the pocket gold to be found there.

It seemed to Dan like an age since he himself had prospected the valley of the Klamath, although he still was middling young. But then he had been born and reared in the hard hills of the Siskiyou.

A country of quick if not always too exact justice. It made the riddle of the bandit all the harder for Dan to read. For the owner of that other pair of gray eyes, Dan knew, also was well aware that in holding up the stage he was flirting with sudden death.

The robber remedied the mishap of the slipping handkerchief. Even while he stood transfixed by Dan's troubled eyes he got his mask back in place. Dan saw that Clay Tobin had not got a glimpse of the bandit's face.

Surely, Dan figured, if the stage driver had seen that scar he must have identified the robber. Although he granted the possibility that the bandit and the driver had not previously met.

The bandit's eyes went cold again. Dan waited for him to speak. He decided he would be guided by what he said.

"Tryin' to pull a fast one, huh?" were his first words. "Now you've come to your senses an' got your paws up, keep 'em there!"

Had the bandit with that searching look tried to tell him something? Dan believed he had. He did not reply to the command. He kept his hands elevated.

The robber jerked the limp mail sack from the stage seat, swinging it under his arm. He started to back away, then changed his mind.

"Think I'll be takin' that ticker, oldtimer," he drawled at Dan, flicking one hand toward the old-fashioned gold chain Dan wore across his vest. "Hand it over!"

Old Clay looked quickly from the robber to his passenger. It had hit the stage driver all of a sudden that the robber's voice was remarkably similar to that of the young man who had so curtly frozen off his introduction to Helen Harmon.

Old Clay could read much behind men's faces and voices. He had not missed the interchange when the eyes of the bandit and his passenger had met. Nor did he overlook the flippant carelessness with which the passenger's watch was removed and dropped into the front of the robber's shirt.

But only Dan was close enough to catch the hissed whisper.

"Okeh—sit tight—"

The pudgy passenger in the rear seat who had been designated as Morgan dropped one hand slyly, apparently believing the bandit was off guard. But the old-fashioned long pistol had flashed around and was pointed at his throat before the fat hand could come up.

"As you were, pilgrim!"

Gone was the easy drawl. The command cracked.

The man Morgan became "as you were" as fast as he could lift his hefty arm. So fast that a weapon clattered to the floor of the stage.

The bandit's long left arm reached

in. He recovered the dropped pistol. Dan twisted in his seat, watching.

"Climb out, you two!" was the bandit's next order. "Take it easy. Ain't much room on this side."

The man who had called himself Shaffroth sputtered. His face was mottled red and white with anger. But he followed Morgan from the stage. The robber backed onto the rocks, keeping everyone under the slowly weaving muzzle of his gun.

"Keep them hands up! Either of yuh moves, yuh get drilled aplenty!"

"You," he said to Dan. "Get out here an' frisk 'em!"

THIS was carrying the thing too far. Dan didn't like it. But then he had taken an instant aversion to the two men when Shaffroth had spoken to the girl. He detested oily voices in fat throats.

Dan didn't want to let himself in for too much, but neither did he want to tip his own hand just now.

"I said frisk 'em!" repeated the bandit. "An' watch your step, mister!"

Was there a hint of amusement in the robber's voice? Dan couldn't tell, but he decided to play the game. Feigning nervous apprehension, he climbed from the stage. From Shaffroth's hip pocket he took an automatic pistol. So both men had been heeled. That was nothing to wonder at, but when Dan's groping hand brought forth a pair of handcuffs, he had an instant of emptiness at the pit of his stomach.

Only John Law packs steel bracelets. True, this Shaffroth looked more like some city stock promoter than a back hills officer, but you never could tell. The bandit saw the handcuffs.

"Huh!" he grunted, starting forward. "So that's it!"

He dropped the mail sack and stepped close, prodding his pistol into Shaffroth's ribs.

"Le' see what's here?"

He brought a handful of papers from Shaffroth's coat pocket. Backing off, he deftly shuffled the documents, reading their titles. With a low oath he twisted the papers into a mass and shoved them into his shirt.

"Now you two," he ordered. "About face! Down trail! Back the way you came an' keep goin'! Get me?"

"Say—listen! Listen!" sputtered Shaffroth. "I'll have you know I'm a officer—I'm a—"

"Shut up! Get goin', mister, 'less yuh want me to loosen up some of the lard under your skin!"

The two men scrambled from behind the stage and started down the road.

"That'll be all," announced the bandit, picking up the mail sack. "Changed my mind, folks, an' here's your mail topside up an' okeh, mister," tossing the sack in beside old Clay.

The bandit backed toward the cliff. Here the gray rock shelved into loose rubble, with stunted pines sticking over the edge fifty feet or so up. Feeling his way with one hand and his heels, the bandit started climbing.

Dan got slowly into the stage. He had been right. Once up over the cliff above the road, it would be easy to strike the Cougar mountain trail to Gold Bar. Dan decided he had best keep a bold face and ride on to Spider Creek, if the stage driver could change tires. He would go on, anyway. If the driver and the girl suspected anything, they had no proof whatever of what was passing through his mind.

AS LONG as the bandit's face was toward him, his pistol still pointed, old Clay sat motionless. But when he was halfway up the loose rubble, the bandit was forced to turn to continue his climb. He accomplished the feat with a lithe movement, slipping his gun into its holster and starting swiftly upward. For the

first time his back was toward the stage.

Then old Clay went into action. He whipped his own long gun from the pocket of the car. With deadly intention he aimed at the climbing bandit. His finger crooked on the trigger.

"Wait!"

Dan rapped out the word, reaching forward and striking old Clay's arm. The pistol roared, the bullet went through the stage top and the girl let out a little scream.

"'Lowed I'd guessed yuh right," said old Clay, swinging the pistol to a line with Dan's head.

"Maybe so, maybe not," drawled Dan coolly, looking into the stage driver's eyes. "An' maybe I'm doin' as much guessin' as you are, but it's my guess you ain't wantin' to shoot."

If old Clay had ever heard that the hand can be quicker than the eye, he probably hadn't believed it. He hadn't seen Dan's hand move. But, with the muzzle pointing directly at his suspected passenger, his gun had been snatched away before he could crook a finger. His wrist felt numb and paralyzed from a blow that had struck an exposed nerve.

"As I've said," drawled Dan. "I've been doin' some guessin' myself, an' I'm goin' lookin' for the answer."

He lifted his grip, placing his own automatic pistol in his coat pocket.

Heavy, running feet pounded on the road. A gun cracked once, again. A bullet whined off the face of the cliff behind the car. The bandit cried out something. He was nearly over the edge, swinging to the limb of a small pine tree.

The man Shaffroth was down on one knee, sighting more carefully this time. Dan swore softly. The man with the handcuffs had another pistol he hadn't got. It looked like he couldn't miss the bandit this time. He was not hurrying. The pistol in his right hand lay across his left arm. He was making sure of his man.

Dan was on the running board of the stage with his own pistol in his hand. To old Clay it may have appeared that he neither raised the weapon nor aimed it. The pistol cracked before Shaffroth could shoot. Shaffroth yelled and rolled to the road, but he scrambled to his feet at once, holding his empty right hand aloft as he yelled again. His own pistol lay several feet away unexploded.

"Nary mistake this time, by—by ginger bread!" shouted old Clay, scrambling to reach his gun where Dan had left it on the floor of the stage. "An' by—by ginger bread, yuh kin shoot!"

"Lordy!" groaned Dan. "Now I'm in it up to my eyes."

He swung around, checking old Clay with his pointed weapon.

"Sorry it worked out that way," he added. "Guess you'll have to change that tire yourself, 'less you can put our fat friends to work. Looks like I got other business."

"An' you looked like a man," came in scathing tone from Helen Harmon. "I know why you're going after that thief. You're one yourself. That's what you are!"

"I never dispute with a lady," said Dan softly.

His own movement up the cliff was swifter than that of the bandit. Old Clay had got his pistol, only to discover that in the same movement that had taken it from him, the cylinder had been snapped open and the shells ejected.

Before he could reload, his puzzling passenger had followed the bandit out of sight over the edge of the cliff.

Old Clay swore once fervently, forgetting the girl.

"First time this here stage has ever been stuck up," he raged in his thin, cracked voice. "An' by—by ginger bread—it's goin' ter be the last!"

He sprang out and up the bank. Morgan and Shaffroth came running up the road, Morgan waving the pis-

tol that had been knocked from his companion's bullet smashed hand. Old Clay was climbing the cliff.

"Get the ——— ———!" shouted one of the men.

They started after the stage driver, but made slow work of the steep bank.

CHAPTER III

THE HANDCUFF MURDER

DAN could see the old stage driver's grimly set jaws as he worked his way up. He had no mind to attempt to stop him, so he slipped away among the stunted trees.

He had heard no sound indicating the direction taken by the bandit, but then Dan didn't need to know more than he had already guessed. The years since he had been on Cougar mountain would not have changed the trail much. Still, almost unconsciously he delayed a moment to look for a sign.

A few yards from the edge of the cliff he came upon a broken bush. The top was bent as though a bull elk might have dragged it in passing. But Dan's eyes saw the cleanly notched cut and that the branch pointed north.

How many years had it been since he had followed that same sign, or in turn left it for another to follow?

It didn't matter. What to most others might look like trackless bush and windfall, upended rock and a bewildering maze of fissures, was to Dan an open pathway to Gold Bar. If his guess was correct, the bandit would be somewhere along that trail, waiting. Then they could have this thing out and he would have his answer to the riddle.

Old Clay wouldn't get far, he thought. He smiled when he heard the old stage driver threshing around in a windfall behind him. He could outdistance the old man, he was sure. Then he had a doubt. The stage driver looked like a native of the back hills.

Probably of the brand that wouldn't quit until he had got his man.

All right, figured Dan. Let him come. After he had the answer to the strange holdup, he was sure there was something that could be explained to old Clay.

Dan did not worry about the fat men, Morgan and Shaffroth. They wouldn't get far into the bush, he thought.

The old stage driver must be pretty mad, the way he was crashing hell bent through the brush. He wasn't showing any caution. Dan decided the stage driver had let his anger run away with his mountain caution. Had he really been the ally of the bandit, as he was now suspected to be, he could have ambushed old Clay a dozen times.

But he was able to keep his pursuer at a distance and he hoped to come up with the bandit in time to give the stage driver the slip. Then Dan stopped in sudden dismay. He had broken through a heavy fringe of bush and come suddenly upon an old burn on the mountain side above Spider Creek.

For more than half a mile a sweeping fire had left a space cleared of everything but a few scattered, ghostly old stumps. He would have to cross the burn or descend into the sprawled town of Spider Creek, which he had no mind to do.

Dan took a few steps, then changed his mind. He knew now why the stage driver had thrown caution to the winds and plunged so recklessly after him. Out in that clearing he would be an open target for old Clay's gun. Whether or not he would be hit, it would force gunplay he did not desire.

Dan wondered if the bandit hadn't paused somewhere across the burn, waiting. At the far side there was no movement in the fringing bush.

Only one thing to do now. Ambush old Clay and prevent him from shoot-

ing. He could hear the stage driver again. Brush crackled. Small stones rolled down the hill. Dan started to back trail directly toward the oncoming old man. When he figured he was close enough, he dropped down behind a mossy log.

The easiest path through the bush at that point lay over the log. Dan heard the stage driver's panting breath before his booted leg was lifted across the down tree. He gripped the leg by the ankle and twisted it, catching the old man as he fell and disarming him.

Old Clay was full of spunk. For a couple of minutes, Dan, husky enough to leave no doubt as to the outcome of the encounter, had his hands full. He didn't want to hurt the stage driver and that made the job more difficult. Even then, he was forced to choke him a little before old Clay subsided.

"Now listen," said Dan. "I've got your gun, an' you might as well sit quiet. I'm no stage robber, it makes no difference what you think. But I can't explain right now. Will you go back?"

"Naw sir!" flared old Clay. "I hain't goin' back! I'm goin' t' git yuh an' that air other dam' thief—first time that there stage has ever been held up an'—"

Dan had no more time to waste in argument. Just then, slipping old Clay's pistol into his own pocket, the weapon clinked on the handcuffs taken from Shaffroth. Dan had a brilliant idea. Before old Clay knew what was happening, one of the steel cuffs was snapped on his skinny wrist.

Kicking and fighting, the stage driver was dragged to a sapling, and five seconds later he was raging and cursing as Dan stepped back, leaving him firmly handcuffed to the small tree.

"That's what I call a nice, neat job," announced Dan, laughing a little at the old man's discomfiture. "An' just to show you I'm meanin' well,

I'm leavin' you my own pocketknife. It'll be a slow job with your left hand, but if you keep at it, I'm thinkin' that a couple of hours' whittlin' will get you loose."

HE STEPPED to one side, far enough from the old man's raving to listen. No sound came from the bush through which they had passed. Dan was convinced that the two fat men long ago had given up the chase. They wouldn't have any stomach, or perhaps they had too much, for the rough going through the tangled windfalls.

Once more he looked across the burn. Still no movement. Then he remembered an old signal. Long time since he had used it, too. He drew his pistol and fired three shots. After the first shot, he waited about ten seconds, then fired the other two in quick succession.

He waited.

"Crack!—Crack-crack!"

The answering signal came from across the burned clearing. A dim figure moved at the edge of the bush. Dan waited no longer. Half running, he crossed the burn.

Once more the bush on the far side showed unmoving green. From the trail behind and the vicinity of the spot where old Clay was handcuffed to the tree came no sound.

Dan put his fingers to his teeth and whistled. The bushes parted and, minus his mask, the bandit with the triangular scar under his left ear stepped out.

"Dave!"

"Dan!"

Only the single word, his name, had come from the stage robber. Yet to Dan Timmons the clear tone in which it was uttered was all the answer he needed. To be sure, he wanted to know more, and he would.

But to Dan there was a world of assurance in his brother's voice. There was plenty of it, too, in the

clear, laughing gray eyes that looked straight into his, in the square angle of the jaw that duplicated his own.

True enough, he had sat in while Dave had robbed the stage, apparently threatening sudden death to the innocent driver and the passengers. But if old Clay and the others had known what Dan knew, the holdup would have been ended abruptly. For Dan was fully convinced that if it came to a showdown, his brother Dave would not shoot any man unless fully justified.

It was characteristic of Dan that he did not plunge directly into questioning his brother. Instead, he said, "How about giving back dad's watch, Dave? You know you plagued him for it, an' I won it fair an' square. Out-shot you three to one."

"Reckon' you're right, Dan, an' here it is," said Dave, producing the timepiece that had been a wonderful piece of jewelry twenty-five years before, and still was.

Dan carefully replaced the chain on his vest. He sat down on a stump.

"Think we'd better be goin' along?" questioned Dave. "Got a lot to spill, Dan, an' we'd have to make camp if we don't make it over the mountain before dark."

"Guess you're right, Dave. It's a—listen! Hear that?"

Dave could hardly have missed hearing it.

"Crack!—Crack-crack!"

The shots rang out clear and sharp on the mountain air.

"Now what do you suppose that might mean?"

"Our old signal," said Dave. "Someone heard us use it."

"Yes," said Dan slowly, in a troubled voice. "But, Dave, that came from across the burn. I left that old stage driver handcuffed to a tree over there. Had to do it. He was fightin' like a pack o' cats."

KEEPING out of sight in the bush, they waited and listened. A minute passed. Three, four, then ten minutes without further sound. So far as they could judge, no one had moved on that side of the burn.

"What do you think, Dan?"

Dan studied the bus'n across the burn for a minute or two before he replied.

Then, "I've got to go back over there, Dave."

"You're crazy, Dan. Bet you it's a trap. Someone heard you shoot, see? Figure we're over here or something. Think they'll draw us out."

Dan considered a minute. He shook his head slowly.

"Can't be helped, Dave. I left that old stage driver over there. He didn't have nary other gun. Maybe those other fellows came up. But why would they shoot like that? I've got a plain out-an'-out hunch that something's wrong I've got to know about."

"If you say so, Dan, we'll go. You always was dead set on any idea you got."

"No, I'll go. You wait here, Dave. No sense to both of us takin' a chance."

"Like hell you will. Not if I know—"

"Just a minute, Dave. Use your head. You started this party. I don't know what it's all about yet. I'm trustin' you, of course, but it's you they got marked. One of us has got to cover while the other one goes and I know where I fastened the stage driver up."

Dave saw the wisdom of that, but he grumbled as Dan started across the burn. Just the same, he chose a point of advantage and rested his rifle across a log where he could cover the whole face of the burned clearing.

A third of the way, then halfway, then three-fourths of the way across the burn, and Dan had heard or seen nothing. The slant of the late afternoon sun threw a heavy shadow over

that part of the mountain. The line of the bush in which old Clay was handcuffed to the tree was a blank wall of green slowly fading to black.

When he was a few yards from the bush, Dave thought he heard a movement farther down the mountain in the direction of Spider Creek. A stone was loosened and a small avalanche of rock seemed to follow.

He had a sudden hope that perhaps the old stage driver had managed to whittle his way through the sapling and free himself. But that would not account for the shots. He went on.

Still no movement in the bush ahead. Although he had his own pistol ready, Dan realized he was in a desperate situation if an ambush had been laid in the bush. He could be shot down before he could even see those who fired the shots.

But when the bush was close, no shot had come and he breathed easier. He covered the last few feet into cover of the brush with a bound. Then with noiseless caution he made his way back to the log where he had trapped the stage driver.

Nearby bushes had been trampled. In the increasing shadow, he could see many footprints, but that meant little, as he recalled how he had been forced to struggle with the old man before he had subdued him.

At first he breathed with relief when he saw the sapling where he had fastened the stage driver. No one seemed to be there. He spotted the tree instantly, for it had stood alone and he had been forced to search for such a tree before he had fastened the handcuffs.

While he was still a few yards away, it looked as though the old man was gone. But first Dan realized that the sapling had not been cut through with the pocketknife he had left with the prisoner.

Then he had another brief, quick wave of relief.

Why hadn't he thought of that be-

fore? The man who owned the handcuffs, Shaffroth. Of course. He had a key to the bracelets. He had come up. Dan wanted to think that, but he had to go on, clear over to the little tree to make sure, and somehow before he was standing beside the sapling he knew that all his guesses were wrong.

The old stage driver lay huddled at the foot of the tree. The handcuff had slipped down as far as it would go. But it still held the old man's wrist and arm. The fettered hand was a lighter mark against the shadow.

When Dan attempted to lift the stage driver, the old man's head rolled limply to one side. Dan's hands were wet with blood that still was oozing from a wound somewhere near the stage driver's shoulder. He did not have to feel the old man's heart to know that he could do nothing.

The pocketknife, his own, lay on the ground. Lacking any other means of freeing the body, Dan picked it up and started cutting at the sapling with desperate haste. No time now to question what had happened.

Others had been here, of course. Dan had no doubt who the others might be. But that gave him no answer to the killing of the helpless old stage driver, a defenseless old man handcuffed to a tree.

That is, it gave him no answer at once. The mere fact of the murder had left him shocked and cold. He had whittled halfway through the tree, was trying to break the tough wood before the enormity of the crime and its reason burst upon him.

And as the truth came to him, he heard branches crackling on the trail that led up from the stage. Slipping to his knees, he drew his pistol and waited.

CHAPTER IV

THE GIRL OF STEEL

THE leafy space in the darkening bush gave Dan visibility for only a few yards. He was prepared to see

the oily face of either Shaffroth or Morgan come into view. Or, if they had carried out the next step in what he was convinced was the purpose of the brutal murder of the old stage driver, the first man to come into his line of vision might be anyone from the town of Spider Creek.

Dan was wholly unprepared for the white face of Helen Harmon. In the semi-darkness her large eyes seemed to glow in her pallid countenance. One cheek had been scratched by the thorny brush. It showed a crooked red mark. The thin garment above her waist was torn from one shoulder.

She stepped straight over the mossy log where Dan had trapped the old stage driver. Then she walked toward him, eyes staring and growing wider as they took in the crumpled body at his feet, the stiffly raised arm held by the handcuff.

"Oh!" she gasped. Then, "Oh-h!" again, a little longer, as though she were striving to hold her breath, keep from fainting.

Believing the girl might swoon, Dan dropped his pistol to the ground in his haste to support her. She shrank from his extended hands and cried out again, covering her eyes. Dan caught the direction of her glance and saw the mark of old Clay's blood on his palms.

"You'd better go," he said quietly. Go back a little way, or sit down over there on the log. He's dead. It isn't what you should see. I must get him loose."

"You!" she exclaimed. Then slowly repeating the word. "You—did—that."

It was an accusation, not a question.

"No," he said. "I just came back. I—"

"Oh! Don't—talk—"

She interrupted, fascinated eyes on the stiffly upright arm. She moved toward the body, looking down at it.

"They—those men then—they

didn't get here—they followed—got lost like I did—they'd have stopped you."

The girl was speaking mechanically. Dan thought the shock of seeing the dead man had been too much for her. That it was sheer terror drawing her toward the body. He started to put out his hand again, to intercept and lead her away until she recovered.

With a quick, lithe movement she evaded him, passed by. As she came close to the body she bent swiftly and picked up the pistol he had dropped. When she faced Dan the hesitant tone of awe and fear had vanished from her voice.

"Don't move until I tell you," she said steadily, without a quaver. "I can shoot and I will."

Dan bowed his head slightly.

"As the lady says. But you're making a slight mistake. Someone else killed the old man."

"Oh, why lie?" flared the girl. "No one but you was here. No one but you had those handcuffs. Those other men followed, but they got lost. We'll start back now, back to the road."

"Don't be foolish," said Dan softly. "I admit you have a right to believe all that. But you're wrong, and you wouldn't shoot unless you were sure. Give me the gun and we'll go."

If the girl had been hysterical, Dan would have feared an accidental shot. He relied on her coolness and a woman's aversion to bloodshed. He took one step toward her.

The pistol jumped in her hand with the shot. The bullet took Dan high in the left shoulder. He felt it nick the bone, numb the side of his neck. It staggered him a little.

"I can shoot and I will," repeated the girl calmly. "You don't have to lie any more. I heard the shots."

Before Dan had recovered, the girl stepped beyond the body. She snapped the magazine of the automatic into her hand without permitting the

weapon to deviate an inch from a line with Dan's breast.

"Five shots gone—I heard you fire three—one in the stage and that last one—they tally—start toward the road!"

Dan's shoulder was paining from the touch of the lead on the bone.

"But listen," he said. "We can't leave the body here. There's cougar—cats on the mountain—we've got to get him loose—"

He was thinking what a girl. Desperate as was his own situation, he could not help admiring her cool poise, the slender Diana-like beauty and her unwavering purpose.

At the mention of the mountain cats, the girl had an instant's hesitation, then she announced firmly.

"Nothing can hurt the poor, old man now. You're going back to the road ahead of me. It's what my father would have me do."

At the mention of her father, Jud Harmon, Dan steeled himself. Much as he disliked to trick the girl, if indeed he could, he had to clear himself of this mess. Then he remembered Dave. He would have heard that shot. Right now he probably was crossing the old burn.

Shrill and clear on the evening air came the whistle of a bull elk far up the burn. Yes, Dave was on his way. He would come all the faster, too, when he got no answer to that signal.

ANOTHER half hour and it would be pitch dark in the bush. Dan figured his best move would be to humor the girl, start back toward the road. Long before they reached it she would have to keep the pistol in direct contact with his body to be sure of hitting him. One swift side step in the darkness, a quick leap, and he could escape.

No, that wouldn't do. She would be left alone to wander blindly through the windfalls and treacher-

ous fissure traps of Cougar mountain. That she had followed the trail this far argued that she knew her way in the woods.

Dan wanted to escape badly enough. Unknowingly, the girl was directing abetting the purpose of the man or men who had murdered the stage driver. But suddenly, Dan also wanted to convince this amazingly cool-headed young woman that he was not guilty.

Nothing to do but start, as she commanded. He didn't want to invite that other shot in the firing chamber of the pistol. She could shoot, all right. He was sure that the lead that had nicked his shoulder could have been in his heart if she had wanted to put it there.

"The lady wins," he said. "I'll walk ahead. Have a care. The firing pin is hair trigger on that gun. I fixed it that way."

With a glance at the huddled body, regretfully sure that before a late moon came over the mountain a cougar would have been attracted by the smell of blood, Dan turned and started.

The men who closed in swiftly from three sides did not include Shaffroth or Morgan. The two fat men from the city could not have crept so silently through the bush, nor have drawn so close. Bushers, miners from Spider City, eight or ten shadowy figures. Rifles were pointed at Dan from three directions.

"We'll take 'im, lady," announced a man with a gun in his hand. "I'm the deputy down at Spider City. Couple of fellows come bustin' into camp sayin' they'd found old man Tobin's body handcuffed to a tree. Yeah. We come up quick, an' sneaked around when we heard the shootin'. You hurt—huh? No—I see—Miss Harmon, eh? He'd oughta knowed better, would if he'd knowed you, I reckon."

The deputy was inclined to be mild in voice and manner.

"Jig's up, pardner," he said to Dan, running one hand over his clothes. "Got your gun, did she?"

"Yes," said Dan, "But I—"

Another man strode forward. His very step had the briskness of brutality, before his voice and his words proved it.

"Hell, Carson!" he growled at the deputy. "Don't be so damned mealy-mouthed. Grab the killin' skunk! Hey, where's Beers with that rope?"

The newcomer towered inches above Dan, and Dan himself was tall. Beady eyes looked down past a hooked nose that had been broken. His face was long and over it a shock of hair came down upon his ears.

"Yes, Scarlan, I was goin' to," mumbled the deputy, fishing in his pocket and bringing out a pair of handcuffs.

"Get 'em on 'm then," said the hook-nosed man. "You, young woman, whadda you know about this here?"

Helen Harmon looked at the man a few seconds before speaking. She bit her lip like she dreaded doing what she must do.

"I heard three shots," she said. "I was following those other men, the ones Mr. Carson said came down to Spider City. I—I got here and this man was trying to get the—the dead man loose from the tree. He had taken those handcuffs off one of the men in the stage during the holdup.

"He'd laid his pistol on the ground. I got it. I—I shot him in the shoulder. Here's the magazine of the pistol. Five shots gone. He shot once at that man Shaffroth down on the road. Oh, it's true. He must have killed the poor, old man. The driver was chasing him—him and the thief that held us up. Look, he's got his watch back. That thief took it. He's seen him. I don't know what it's all about. It's all so terrible."

This time it looked like the girl

really would faint. She caught at a small tree for support.

"Yeah, he's the skunk that did it, all right," growled Scarlan. "Guess that's evidence enough. Where's that rope?"

THE deputy made a feeble effort to assert his authority.

"But you can't do that, Scarlan—y' see, I gotta get him down to the county jail an'—"

"What t'hell, Carson? You an' your jail! Hey, listen! I'm runnin' this party, see! Gotta a better idea. Yank the bracelets off that body an' I'll show y' how we work on killers at Sawyers Chute. Git 'em off, that damned old . . . ain't needin' 'em any longer!"

The oath was foul, doubly so directed at the dead body of poor, old Clay. And the man Scarlan accompanied it with an effort to free the corpse, yanking the body around and pulling on the arm with utter disregard for the sanctity of the dead.

Rifles had remained pointed at Dan. Deputy Carson was close beside him with his pistol in his hand. But had Dan known that his movement would be the signal for every weapon there to bore him with their leaden messengers of death, still he would have done what he did.

Resentment at the hideous sacrilege, at the epithet directed toward the body of old Clay flamed and exploded at the base of Dan's brain. He hurled himself across the few yards of space separating him from Scarlan, fist driving upward and smashing squarely upon the foul mouth of the defamer of the dead. The first blow, which caught the ruffian by surprise, was followed with swift rights and lefts that drove the man's head back and crumpled him to his knees.

Dan, furious with rage, was panting out oaths of his own, but they were clean washed by his own righteous fury. If he expected a bullet in

the back, he was not caring. All he wanted to do was batter the foul mouth under his fists until the man Scarlan would be days uttering another painless word.

The men with the rifles stood like statues. Perhaps some were paralyzed with surprise at the suddenness of Dan's attack. Others were clean-minded enough to exult inwardly at what was happening to Scarlan. In ten seconds it was over. The quivering hulk of Scarlan crashed to the ground. Blood streamed from his face and his mumbled words were indistinct.

"There, damn you, that much for a dead man!" said Dan, standing over the defamer.

For the moment he had forgotten the circle of rifles, and forgotten the girl. If he had been glancing at Helen Harmon, he would have seen her face slowly being transfigured from a look of bewildered doubt to a sudden, glowing certainty as she swayed beside the tree and leaned toward him with parted lips.

He would have heard the lips saying something that was strangely contradictory.

"I was wrong! Oh, I was wrong! I'm sorry—sorry! I'm glad—glad—what can I do?"

But not all of the men were in sympathy with Dan's attack. And all of them still believed him to be the killer, although his action may have struck them as strange.

Three men sprang forward. A pair of gorilla-like arms encircled Dan's neck from behind, pulled him back and down.

"Grab 'im! Get that rope! Damn you all! Get that rope, I say!"

Scarlan was raging again, arising, mopping the blood from his face. A sharp blow over his ear dazed Dan for a minute. He imagined as he sank down half conscious that a bull elk whistled shrilly high up on the old burn. When he was dragged to his

feet, his hands were drawn painfully tight behind him and a rope was lopped around his shoulders. A man booted him with his knee into the bush and down the hill toward Spider Creek.

Because of all this, Dan had no opportunity to watch the movements of Helen Harmon. He would have been amazed and puzzled to have seen her pass close to one of his captors in the half darkness, light, darting hand extracting a pistol from its holster.

When Dan's head cleared, he was being half propelled down the hill through the thick brush and Helen Harmon was walking near him, a little to the rear.

CHAPTER V

SPIDER CREEK JUSTICE

DAN was well enough informed on Spider Creek justice from other days to be aware that it asked few questions, took much for granted, cross-examined no one and gave no reprieves. Yet even the gold and timber camp in the canyon under Cougar mountain had its code of fairness.

In the majority of cases the evidence against the culprits of the region was clear. Nearly always someone had seen the gun flame, the knife flash or the thief on the sluice box. In his own case, the evidence was purely circumstantial, yet his position was bettered little or none at all by that.

Helen Harmon's clear-thinking deductions had convicted him instantly in the minds of the posse, ostensibly headed by Deputy Sheriff Carson, but really commanded by the ruffian Scarlan. Dan had been given his trial, all he would ever get, up there beside the body of old Clay Tobin.

He did not expect to be taken all the way to Spider Creek. Scarlan was forging ahead, leading the way toward a shelving plateau about half-

way from where the body had been found to the sprawling town. One man who walked close beside Dan, by his roughness and the ready use of his boot or his knee to hurry the prisoner down the hill through the thick bush, identified himself as one of those who seemed to accept Scarlan's word as law.

In the brief march down the mountain, wits whetted by the imminence of death, Dan had a chance to classify the ten men in the posse. Deputy Carson, a rather rotund and apparently futile figure, seemed soft and cowed by Scarlan. Two other men wore prospectors' clothes and kept to themselves, talking low together.

That left six men on each of whom was a definite mark of sullenness, of ugly dispositions made more sour by the fact that they had been drinking recently of Spider Creek moonshine. If it was anything like the poison Dan remembered having been sold in the camp, it tended to transform the mildest of men into rattlesnakes. Besides the man with the ready boot near him, the other five kept with Scarlan, following him eagerly and passing a couple of flasks among them.

Dan took a thorough and wholesome stock of the situation and could see only one faint loophole for escape. His brother Dave had not been accounted for. Although the girl had called attention to the presence of the erstwhile stage robber somewhere on the mountain, but little attention had been paid to her.

Dan was convinced that out in the deepening night across the old burn, Dave would be trailing along parallel with their descent. And Dave knew the crooked trails of Cougar mountain better than any man in the posse. Dan's fear was that his usually impetuous brother would start hostilities recklessly, which with the numbers against him likely would precipitate a fight in which blood would be spilled and a blacker count than

the stage robbery placed against him if he escaped the bullets of the Spider Creek men.

Deputy Carson stayed close by. Although the capture and whatever punishment Scarlan proposed to mete out had been taken out of his hands, the mild, overridden deputy was going through the form of bringing his prisoner toward Spider Creek.

Helen Harmon seemed to have no difficulty keeping an even pace with the men. Despite his own desperate situation, Dan caught himself admiring the easy grace with which she traversed the thick and stubborn bush. The girl had been born to the outdoors, to this semi-wilderness, Dan could tell that.

Scarlan profanely announced their arrival at the plateau. He halted abruptly and swung around, waiting for the others to come up. The plateau was of bare rocks, fringed on three sides by dense growth.

In the eastern slit of Gold Bar canyon appeared a yellow radiance. It grew in brilliance as Dan was half propelled onto the rock of the plateau. A Siskiyou full moon, yellow as polished gold and of balloon size, was rising at the head of the canyon. Such a mountain moon as seemed to be of enormous size in the first minutes of its rising before it would turn to silver and flood Cougar mountain with a brightness almost as full as day.

Scarlan cursed and indicated a deformed pine at the edge of the rocks.

"Yank 'im over there, Beers," he commanded the man who had been guarding Dan. "Git the rope over a limb an' we'll take a vote."

He laughed harshly.

"Gotta take a poll o' the jury first, but I'm guessin' there hain't goin' t' be no dissentin' voice."

His tone indicated that he considered this a great joke. The men whom Dan had judged to be adherents of Scarlan joined in the coarse laughter.

A flask was drained around and smashed against a rock.

Dan expected nothing from Deputy Carson. His feeble remonstrance at the time of his capture marked him as helpless. The two men who had worn an air of decency and kept to themselves, were furtively moving away, edging toward the lower slant of the plateau below which showed the scattered lights of the town.

If the pair did not agree with Scarlan and had no stomach for his plan, their only action in opposition was toward getting themselves out of it quietly.

Beers and one of the other men shoved Dan roughly across the rock. One unfastened the coils of rope around his shoulders, leaving his hands bound, and threw the end over the projecting limb of the pine. Dan hadn't said a word. A ghastly remembrance turned him cold. It was the memory of a picture he had once seen called "The Gibbet Moon."

A dead man had dangled at the end of a rope, his body outlined in the background of a rising, full moon.

Scarlan surprised him. Face swollen from contact with Dan's fists, one eye nearly closed and lips thick from the pounding, he planted himself in front of the prisoner and leered at him.

"You're Dan Timmons, hain't yuh?" he asked suddenly.

So far as he knew, Dan's name had not been mentioned. He was not aware that anyone, even the girl, had known his name.

"Shaffroth spotted yuh on the stage," went on Scarlan, not waiting for Dan to deny or affirm his statement. "On yer way up here I s'pose to go in cahoots with that brother o' yourn on Gold Bar, huh? One of them big city detectives outside, huh? Shaffroth had your number 'fore yuh done the killin'."

DAN could not repress an exclamation of surprise. So Shaffroth and Morgan had known him on the stage. He instantly grasped that there must be considerable more to the murder of the stage driver than the petty desire for revenge on the part of Shaffroth for the shooting in the road. Otherwise all that information would not have been imparted to this man Scarlan.

Dan did not reply, for the reason that he was studying Scarlan's face intently in the increasing moonlight. He had not had a good look at him in the gloom of the woods on the mountain. Now he was going back into his mind, picking up the man's feature one at a time, trying to fit them into a picture he was striving vainly to make complete.

He had got far enough to make certain that Scarlan was not a mountainer, that he was an outsider in the Klamath River country. Likewise, he was convinced that the six men accompanying him were others of his own kind. If he could have seen them against the background of a city alley or somewhere in a crooks' hangout on the waterfront of San Francisco, he was convinced he might have been able to classify more than one of them in a rogues' gallery he carried in the back of his head.

Scarlan went on in vindictive triumph.

"Cleaned yourselves out, you an' your damn smart stage robbin' brother. That's what yuh done. You're passin' out all legal, too, far as that goes. Hain't a man in Spider Creek or Siskiyou county but what'd give three cheers t' see yuh swingin' after they've heered what yuh done. An' the same dose is comin' to your brother when we git 'im."

"Dan Timmons?"

Deputy Carson broke in on Scarlan to inquire, and Dan thought his voice proved he was nervous and scared.

Before Scarlan repeated with mali-

cious accent on the name, Helen Harmon stepped close to him, echoing Carson's words.

"You're Dan Timmons? Then the—the man who held up the stage was Dave—your brother, Dave."

For the first time since he had met her on the stage, Helen Harmon's voice held a tremulous note. Its tone held the suggestion that not only had she heard of Dan and Dave, but that she had no reason for enmity toward them.

"Yes," answered Dan quietly. "I'm Dan Timmons. I'm admitting nothing about my brother. The stage bandit was masked. You saw him as well as I did."

"Dan and Dave Timmons?" the girl repeated slowly, almost fearfully. "The Dave Timmons my father had always thought so wonderful. Why, he's written me whole pages about his claim on Gold Bar and how he's worked night and day, doing the work of half a dozen ordinary men. I—oh, this is the most terrible thing that's ever happened to me."

The girl buried her face in her hands for an instant, but looked up quickly when Scarlan growled out a curse. Dan was so taken back at what she had said, at her attitude, that he permitted himself to be pushed roughly toward the rock under the pine tree.

"Aw, what the hell's all this?" shouted Scarlan angrily. "Git the rope on the . . . skunk's neck 'fore it turns out to be a religious meetin' or somethin'."

"Dan Timmons!"

Deputy Carson repeated his name. Although his voice was raised a little, it was as mild as before. It made his next words and his quick action all the more unexpected.

"Stand back there, Scarlan!" said the deputy. "An' you, Beers, an' the rest o' yuh. Dan Timmons gets a court trial, all fair an' square. Yuh hear?"

"Why you . . . measly small

town cop!" roared Scarlan, turning on Carson. "I'll take yuh t' pieces an' plaster yuh—"

"PUT up your hands, Scarlan! An' keep 'em up! An' if one o' your gang makes a sudden move it's you that's goin' to die of lead poison! Dan Timmons is my prisoner! He gets a court trial. Yuh get me?"

Dan caught his breath at the suddenness of it, at the wholly unexpected flash of clear grit on the part of the mild-mannered deputy. And the deputy's gun had jumped into his hand and was burying its muzzle in Scarlan's stomach. Whatever else the ruffian might have been, he was no fool. He knew from a man's voice when he would shoot.

He lifted his hands, although his head twisted and his eyes sought help from his men, even while he mouthed a stream of curses. One of the men nearest Dan apparently did not read the truth in Carson's quietly decisive manner. The man's rifle started up.

Then Dan got his second surprise.

From somewhere in the folds of Helen Harmon's dress appeared a pistol. She leveled it at the man with the rifle and cried out in warning:

"I can shoot and I will. You get your hands up, too."

Dan could not help his involuntary exclamation.

"Believe me, brother, she can and she will, I know!"

Dan attempted to twist his hands free from the rope around his wrists. It was knotted too tightly. If he had been free, and had not Helen Harmon attempted to assist him, it is possible that Scarlan's gang would have been held at bay long enough to have provided a means of escape for Dan.

The man who had been checked by the girl's leveled pistol was quick to see his chance. As the girl's hand sought the rope behind Dan's back, he sprang to one side, snapped his

rifle to his shoulder and fired point-blank at Deputy Carson.

Carson tried to make good his word. The pistol that had been held in Scarlan's stomach roared into the night, almost as soon as the rifle spoke but the leaden slug that had taken him full in one shoulder had spun him around and Scarlan was untouched.

The girl's help had freed Dan's wrists, but he feared it was too late. The deputy turned slowly on his heels and slumped to the ground at his feet. At that, Helen Harmon thrust her pistol into his hand.

"Make a break, quick!" she said in Dan's ear. "Back of the rocks! Hold 'em off I'll bring help!"

Apparently believing none of Scarlan's men would shoot at her, she sprang away, running with light feet toward the fringe of bush at the lower edge of the plateau.

"Don't shoot! Get her!" yelled Scarlan as he threw himself upon Dan, dragging at his own gun.

Dan's arms were numb from the position in which they had been bound. For an instant he held the pistol the girl had given him in nerveless fingers, powerless to lift it. He thought Deputy Carson was dead. Apparently all of his heroic defiance had been in vain.

Scarlan's gun was coming up.

The shrill whistle of a bull elk came from the rocks on which the pine tree that was to have been Dan's gallows stood.

"Get 'em up—all a yuh, if yuh wanta live!"

CHAPTER VI

THE FRAME-UP

DAVE! And at fifty paces Dave could make fast and fatal medicine with a sixshooter. At a hundred paces he could snip the buttons off a man's clothes.

The plateau now was flooded with brilliant moonlight. Only the clump

of rocks lay in the shadow of the pine tree. Whether he had or had not ever seen a sample of Dave's shooting, Scarlan had the streak that doesn't go around inviting bullets promiscuously.

Doubtless Scarlan could have shot Dan by risking his own hide. His quick lifting of his hands indicated he intended keeping his skin unpunctured. One of his men was more foolhardy. He took up the movement with his own gun where his chief had left off.

The man's pistol came part way from its holster. His arm, having begun the motion, seemed powerless to halt. A streak of blue fire stabbed past Dan's head. The posseman's hand continued to ascend, but it was no longer holding the gun. Also, only three fingers remained on the hand. The thumb and forefinger were cleanly missing.

"Said alla yuh!" drawled the voice in the rocks. "Back out, Dan!"

Dan's arms were beginning to recover some sensation. With his own gun lifted he slid over the rocks. He made out Dave's figure flattened in a niche, his rifle alongside his cheek.

"Keep goin'," said Dave. "Straight down the gully behind me. I'll be with yuh in a jiffy."

Dan foresaw graver trouble ahead for Dave. Already he had robbed the stage, a felonious offense. Dan more than suspected that Scarlan's men were killers imported into the Klamath country for some mysterious reason, but it was only suspicion. He didn't want anyone's blood on his brother's hands.

"Make a break yourself, Dave," he said in a low voice. "I'm all topside up. Let's go."

"I'll be comin' along, Dan."

Then in a raised voice.

"Now you hombres about face an' keep them hands lifted! The next poison ain't goin' to be a manicure for gun fingers. Savvy?"

Scarlan apparently had no stomach for stand up gun fighting where the other fellow, even though he was only one and they were seven, had the advantage. And Dave had it. One sample of his shooting had been a plenty plus for Scarlan.

He cursed an order to his men. And in the back of his crafty brain he had a plan. The gunner in the rocks would have to give up his shelter to get out.

Dan slipped away a few yards and waited. He heard the men clumping across the plateau. He saw Dave get up quickly, slide toward him with a gesture for him to keep on going. And he was prepared for the burst of firing that broke out before they had traversed fifty yards back into the bush.

Lead zipped through the bushes over the brothers, whined with sinister menace off the rocks. Dave's rifle was lifted to fire at the flashes of the other guns. Dan laid a hand on his arm.

"Let it ride as is, Dave. Let's make tracks for the old trail. They're checheckos in these hills, all of 'em. Back doors in city alleys are more to that crowd's likin'."

"Damn 'em," said Dave. "They're Jud Harmon's hired men. That big one, Scarlan's, the one who's been doin' all his dirty work on Gold Bar. Harmon ain't got the guts to do what Scarlan's been doin'."

Dan was more puzzled than ever. But this was no time for explanations.

"All the same, Dave, that'll keep. We ain't out of the woods by a helluva lot yet."

Dan's wisdom was quickly proved. Failing to draw return fire to guide them to the whereabouts of the fugitives, Scarlan's men threshed around, beating the bush blindly. Their noise betrayed them, while Dan and Dave merely slipped into a shallow fissure and increased their distance from the plateau.

Dan was first to call a halt. A min-

ute or two of listening brought no sound. The futile pursuit had ended. After another minute or two, Dan's quick ears caught the rattling of loose rubble farther down the hill. He marked it for men on their way down.

"That's that, Dave. Now, whadda y' say, boy, we lay a few cards on the table an' see who holds tricks an' why?"

DAVE hesitated a moment, then he took a folded paper from his shirt.

"Seen me take that offa that fat ham in the stage, didn't yuh, Dave?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that paper's an injunction, which I'm reckonin' was about to be served on one David Timmons pronto, or as soon as that lousy walrus could wobble himself up to Gold Bar. I ain't familiar with legal terms, but three, four days ago, after someone had taken a couple pot shots at me an' missed, along comes this Scarlan with the advice that I'm to get off Gold Bar.

"Says Jud Harmon's sued out this here injunction on account o' the water rights, an' that it's on its way up here by mail today or tomorrow. Scarlan 'lowed it'd be served all legal like, an' I'd have to be pullin' my freight. Said I might as well be pullin' it anyhow.

"Trouble all started 'bout a month ago when I first wrote you, Dan. Jud Harmon'd been playin' friendly like, gettin' into my confidence, I reckon. He'd been comin' down to the claim an' chinnin' right smart. Even showed me some letters he'd got from his girl that's been away to school. Was interested in how much gravel I'd been pannin' an' kept tellin' me how lonesome he was.

"That ain't all. He even hinted 'round that his Sawyers Chute claim joined up with mine an' we might find it to our mutual advantage to team up on the workin's an' do some shaft development down to bed-rock, seein'

if we couldn't uncover somethin' bigger. Said he was gettin' too old to tackle a real shaft an' tunnel job alone, but he was sure there must be some big pocket gold or maybe a lode underneath.

"Damn 'm, Dan! I'd a been sucker enough to fall for that stuff, if it hadn't been I wanted to write you an' see what you'd say. Said he was goin' to have an expert up to Sawyers Chute an' do some borin'. Then about a month ago, along comes this fellow Scarlan. First off, I finds out he's supposed to be the hombre what's to do the borin', an' that he's bringin' in a working gang for the job."

"How many men's he got?" interrupted Dan.

"Oh, I'd say maybe a dozen or so. Don't know as I've seen 'em all. Anyway, Dan, Jud Harmon ain't got the guts to come out in the open an' tell me what he's got on his mind after that. Week after Scarlan is hired, Jud sends him down to my claim one morning. Won't face me in what he's wantin', Jud won't.

"This Scarlan 'lows they're goin' to tackle some big developin' an' warns me water's goin' to be short. It was. Next day there wasn't any water to speak of in Gold Bar. Had to stack my diggin's an' wait to wash it later. But next day an' the next it gets worse, an' there ain't any water since on account of Jud Harmon havin' had his crew divert the whole creek. Ain't much water this time o' year, anyway, an' for the next six months there won't be any."

"What did Harmon say when you kicked?" asked Dan.

"That's what I said, Dan. Jud ain't got the guts to face me. I goes up to Sawyers Chute about the water an' the raw deal I'm gettin' and this fellow Scarlan an' a couple of his ugly mugs threatens a gun whippin' if I'm caught over the boundaries of Jud's claim. Me, I ain't honin' for trouble an' purposely don't pack no iron on

account o' you tellin' me I'm plumb rash on triggernometry.

"I wants t' see Jud, but he'd give orders for me to stay off, an' that he wasn't goin' to be bothered. That's when I wrote you that second letter."

"Yeah? An' y' say, Dave, it looked like they'd done some borin'."

"'Peared they had been. Fact they had considerable of a dump up back of Jud's cobble house, an' a lot more rock had been moved dammin' the creek an' swingin' it over into the old course so's I wouldn't have any water."

"Let's see that paper, Dave."

Dan studied the document with its red seal in the moonlight a minute.

"H'm," he mused. "Looks all legal enough. Fact, I'd say it looks kinda extra legal. An' that Shaffroth was all heeled for trouble. So you got the bright idea that robbin' the mail 'd help you outa trouble, Dave?"

Dave stammered a little.

"No—yes—that is, y'see, Dan. I wanted to put the danged thing off 'til you got up here. If I'd a seen yuh on the stage 'fore I'd played my hand, reckon I'd a held off. But after I'd started, I couldn't see any quittin' place, an' after all, I didn't rob the mail."

"No. Which don't mean much one way or the other. I'm wonderin' about Shaffroth an' that fellow Morgan. I get around considerable outside, but I don't remember any deputies or marshals around the capital that answers their description. An' that paper was issued outa Sacramento."

"Scarlan didn't say anything about any outside John Law comin' in, Dan. I remember, he said that I'd be gettin' offa Gold Bar pronto after Carson got the papers in the mail at Spider Creek."

Dan started suddenly to his feet.

"Good Lord, Dave! Carson! I've gotta go back! He's up there, dyin' or dead by this time like as not. An' say, Dave, he showed some unexpected

guts the way he went to bat for me, an' you too, when he found out who we were."

"But Dan—"

"You stay here, Dave—I'll see—maybe Scarlan's crowd took the body along. But I gotta be sure."

"Stay here? Me? C'mon, Dan. Guess I got yuh into this. I'm movin' we stick together from now on."

WITH the moon higher, the plateau was brighter than before. The body of Deputy Carson was a dark spot on the gray rocks. But as they approached cautiously, pausing by the pine tree to listen and hearing nothing, Dan caught a faint moan. In an instant he was lifting the heroic deputy's head.

Carson pleaded for a drink, his voice choked and gurgling. His clothes were soaked with blood from the hole in his shoulder.

"You? Dan Timmons? Dave?" he questioned feebly when a swallow of whisky from Dave's flask had revived him slightly.

"Good God, boys! Yuh git out quick! Yuh hain't got no time t' waste! Reckon it's all up with me, so don't yuh waste no time botherin'. Jest slip me another li'l shot an' keep goin', boys."

"Forget it, Carson," said Dan. "You make yourself easy. Wait'll we see what can be done about that bleedin'. You ain't out yet by a long shot."

Gulping down another swallow of whisky, Carson raised himself with frantic effort, insisting that they leave him.

"I'm tellin' yuh I won't last! I'm—jest about all gone, I'm thinkin'. An'—an'—listen! The whole town o' Spider Creek'll be hell hootin' up here most any time now. They're—comin'—to git yuh—you an' Dave for—for ol' Clay Tobin—an'—an' me, too. For God's sake! Don't yuh un'erstand? An' me, too. That damn coyote Scarlan had it all framed 'fore they went

down the hill. They're routin' out the town to git yuh an' lynch yuh for killin' old Clay an' me—they thought I was dead—I'd jest come to an' was listenin'—they grabbed the girl—Helen Harmon—couple o' Scarlan's gang's escortin' her to Sawyers Chute so's she can't tell the truth—an' they're goin' to tell the town, Dan, that you killed old Clay, an' then shot me makin' a break t' git away."

"Never mind, Carson," said Dan. "They couldn't pull anything like that. Why, there's decent men that'd know better."

Carson pulled himself up with a final desperate attempt to drive the truth home.

"Decent men? Hell, yes, Dan! But don't yuh see—with the girl gone, they got the goods on yuh—got the goods—yuh'll be swingin', both o' yuh, where yuh can't talk, an'—an' it won't help yuh none what the girl tells arterwards—for God's sake, Dan—Dave—git away—git away—an'—an' thanks for the—drink—"

Carson's voice trailed off. The effort had been too much for his waning strength. He slumped limply in Dan's arms.

From down the mountain in the direction of Spider Creek came faint shouts. Someone whistled shrilly. A gun cracked on the night. Then another one.

Dan straightened. He could see the aroused town as plainly as though he were standing in the single, straggling street. Drunken men eager for an orgy of killing, grim-faced miners more soberly set on administering what they with good reason believed to be justice, pouring out of the speak-easies and the dance halls, spurred on by Scarlan and his gang.

It looked as though Carson was dying at their feet. The evidence was all against them. Dan's eyes turned slate-colored and hard.

"Some frame-up, boy, some frame-up," he said slowly. "Dave, catch hold.

We wouldn't stand a chance, but we ain't leavin' Carson here. They may get us, but unless I'm sure he's dead, he's goin' with us."

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN PACK

CARSON was awkward, hampering dead weight in their arms. Getting the limp body over the rocks toward the Gold Bar trail was no light task. Yet as long as the body remained limp a spark of life remained and neither Dan nor Dave would have left the apparently dying deputy there with the chance that he would be ignored by the new posse out of Spider City.

Thus their progress was slow. The shouts of the more drunken of their pursuers rang closer on the still air of the mountain. Oaths and ribald laughter proclaimed the coming of the manhunters.

But it was not those who were giving voice to their desire for vengeance who worried Dan most. For every loud-mouthed proclaimer of his presence in the chase, Dan knew there would be another man. These other men would be silent. They would be sober. They would come boring up the mountain to the plateau and there they would bend keen and knowing eyes on the moonlighted rocks and brush.

These silent, grim-visaged, keen-eyed men were the real danger. If there was a boot scrape on a rock they would see it. A bush slightly bent would be a readable sign. Among them would be men who knew the old trail across Cougar mountain to Gold Bar. These men would strike straight for their goal.

And, having the evidence furnished by Scarlan and his gang, when they ran down their quarry there would be no argument. No bluster. None of the tactics or flourish employed by Scarlan. Probably they would not even

bother about a rope. Punishment and justice as they saw it would be ministered quickly and efficiently with trigger fingers.

Before Dan and Dave progressed a hundred yards through the bush back of the plateau, they realized that they could not continue to carry the body of Carson and escape. The cries of the chase were coming closer, and the calls indicated the posse was spreading out.

In one of their forced pauses for breath, Dan said, "We've gotta do some thinkin', Dave. Runnin' ain't goin' to get us far. Besides, we can't do any shootin'. Understand?"

"You mean we gotta let 'em come, Dan."

Dave's voice was tense. At every shout floating on the night his hand crept toward his old-fashioned Colts.

"Yeah, an' you know it, Dave. I'm bettin' there ain't one of Scarlan's gang with the posse. Way I got him figured, he's framed the thing so there don't look to be any holes, any chance for us, an' his best play's to keep out of it. See the idea? He's got the girl to look after an' right now, unless I'm a bum guesser, his whole crowd's on the way to Sawyers Chute."

"An' we—yuh think we shouldn't fight—huh?"

"Got friends at Spider City, haven't you, Dave? Wouldn't wanta be killin' someone that thinks he's right an' only doin' his duty, would y', Dave? You—we got into this thing—mostly by accident maybe, but we don't wanta shoot some oldtimer that's only doin' his duty accordin' to his lights an' the information he's actin' on. We'll do some thinkin'. Wait a minute. I gotta idea."

A daring piece of strategy had flashed into Dan's mind. The wiser ones of the posse doubtless were headed directly for the Gold Bar trail. Up to this minute he and Dave had been playing right into their hands. The inert form of the wounded deputy

made it impossible for them to make any speed. They would be overtaken before they could go half a mile farther through the bush.

"We're goin' back," said Dan suddenly. "Catch hold, Dave. We'll head straight for the place where they're yellin' the loudest. Pull your hat down over your eyes, keep your head down an' travel."

"Yuh mean we're t' walk right into 'em."

"Right through 'em, maybe," said Dan grimly. "If you was one of that crowd huntin' us, would you expect to find us bringin' Carson's body down to the town? Chances are we'll run into some hombres that don't know us. Ain't any of 'em lookin' for a job helpin' tote a dead man down the hill. An' I'm bettin' every son-of-a-gun that's drunk an' got a gun is somewhere on the mountain. They likely won't know who's who."

Dave saw the sense to that. They picked up Carson and started. None of the posse had reached the plateau when they came to its edge. Keeping close to the bush at one side where the shadows were deepest, they kept doggedly on their way, walking straight into the arms of the men who were hunting them.

THE shouts came closer. At any second Dan expected to see some of the hunters break into view on the plateau. He signalled to Dave and they laid the body down, taking a deep breath for the ordeal ahead. Then Dave's eyes widened with wonder.

Without warning, Dan pulled the pistol the girl had given him and began shooting. He kept on firing into the air until it was empty. As he fired he yelled and cursed loudly. Louder shouts of the oncoming men answered from the lower edge of the plateau.

"C'mon, Dave!"

The astonished Dave took Carson's shoulders. Dan took up the legs and

with heads bent low they staggered toward the half dozen men who came bursting onto the plateau.

"Seen the —?"

A drunken voice hailed them.

Dan growled out an oath.

"Yeah! The—. They're headin' for the Gold Bar trail! Think maybe we hit one of 'em! Carson hain't dead yet! We'll git 'im down!"

The men came closer with a rush. Dan studied every face he could see in the moonlight. He wondered if Dave recognized any of the men, but he dared not ask.

"Hain't dead, huh?" said a drunken voice. "Well, ol' Clay's dead enough, they say. Guess that's enough for us. Thash right. Y' boys git pore ol' Carson down. We'll git them—"

Dan and Dave plodded past. Other men poured onto the plateau. The first arrivals were yelling and racing on up the mountain. Those behind hurried to join them. A dozen or more of the posse saw the burdened pair. They noted the weighty body of Carson in their arms. The men were curious but not to the point of wanting to quit the chase and become pallbearers. Their liquor heated blood demanded excitement. One and all they carefully kept away from the possibility of being asked to help.

Thus the posse passed. Except for a few drunken stragglers who were finding the bush hard going and who wouldn't get far, the way down the mountain to Spider City was clear.

The pack of manhunters broke into full cry up toward the Gold Bar trail. Dan and Dave rested and laid Carson's body alongside the horse trail from Spider City to the bar and Sawyers Chute. They could see the single, crooked street of the town. Except for a few women in little groups on the sidewalks, the place was deserted.

"Now what?" questioned Dave.

"Know where's horses?"

"Yeah," said Dave. "The corral of

the loggin' company's up the creek apiece."

Ten minutes later Carson's limp body was laid across a horse. Dan had staunched the flow of blood from the shoulder, although he discovered that it had almost ceased. Still the heart beat feebly and the deputy breathed.

No one had been watching at the corral. So far as they could discover, they had a clear trail to Gold Bar. Dan doubted whether the posse would make it that far along the old trail before morning. The mountain trackers would soon discover they were on a dead scent. They would figure that the hunted men would know better than to make for Dave's claim. Any signs they might find would prove that the fugitives had not gone on, although with the number of men who had crossed the plateau there was little chance of discovery that the posse had been tricked.

"What's your idea?" asked Dave.

"We're hittin' straight for Sawyers Chute. We'll fix Carson up at your cabin, if he's still livin'."

"Us go to Gold Bar? Be the first place they'll head for," argued Dave.

"Old stuff," said Dan. "Down in the city when a crook's a hot shot you wouldn't expect to find him in his usual hangout. An' because he's sure you wouldn't be lookin' for him there, that's the place he's most likely to be picked up. See the point?"

Dave tried to figure it out.

"So, on account of them bein' pretty certain we won't be where we'd be thinkin' they'd look for us first, that's where we'll be. An' that place is your cabin at Gold Bar."

Dave shook his puzzled head.

"That's kinda mixed up, Dan, but yuh sure guessed right on walkin' through 'em down the mountain."

No queerer manhunt had ever been staged in the Siskiyou.

High up on Cougar mountain most of the male population of Spider City fought through the tangled bush. An

occasional shot punctured the stillness of the night. Dan thought grimly it would be a miracle if some of the red-eyed possemen did not shoot each other in the tricky moonlit shadows of the Gold Bar trail.

And while possibly a hundred or more men were combing the mountain above, grimly determined to exact full justice for what they believed to be a double killing, Dan and Dave rode peacefully along the lower saddle trail, disturbed only by the distant shouts and shooting.

Dave suggested once that they hurry along.

"Takin' our time," said Dan. "Got to do some more figurin', Dave. Way I've got it doped out, Scarlan an' his men started hell bent for Sawyers Chute. They'd want to get Helen Harmon outa the way so's she wouldn't talk. See? That way they're lettin' the posse from Spider Creek do their dirty work. By this time they're pretty sure their frame-up worked."

"Yeah," murmured Dave. "An' Scarlan'd want to report to Jud Harmon. His girl help us by tellin' the truth? Hell, no. Nobody by the name of Harmon'd ever do anything square. Got it all his own way now, Jud has. Wanted both claims. He's got 'em. Tried to use the girl as bait to pull me his way an' join up, an' when that fell down, hires this gang."

Dan rode along for a full minute in silence.

Two things he had heard Helen Harmon say came back to him.

"I'm doing what my father would want me to do."

She had said that when she thought she was holding him for the murder of the old stage driver.

But most of all.

"I can shoot and I will."

"Don't be too sure of anything, Dave. That's my motto. I used to jump at answers to everything. Since I've been in the police game down below, I'm never sure of the answer to any-

thing. But all the same, Dave, the girl's on the square an' I've been gettin' some funny notions about the rest of this mess."

"Well, maybe the girl's okeh," admitted Dave. "But I'm dead sure on Jud Harmon."

"Dave, I've discovered that when you're dead sure of something, that's just the time to begin cogitatin' an' lookin' around to see if y' ain't overlooked some stray ends."

"How long's it been since you saw Jud Harmon, Dave?"

Dave flared angrily. The injustice of all that had happened had rubbed his temper raw.

"That's what I said, Dan. He hain't got th' guts t' do his own dirty work. I ain't seen him since he sent that damned Scarlan down t' my place with his orders an' they robbed me of water."

"That's just why I've been cogitatin' an' lookin' around in my mind for some stray ends," said Dan.

CHAPTER VIII

GUNNIN' ON GOLD BAR

THE strike of the first sunlight across Sawyers Chute and Gold Bar revealed no life. Dave's claim with its small cabin of half-hewn pine would have looked little like a place of golden treasure to any other than a veteran prospector.

Piles of round rubble rocks, worn smooth by centuries of creek washing, were all that marked the toil that had found the gold in the canyon bar under Cougar mountain. The canyon had widened a little here and was perhaps a hundred yards across for the distance of half a mile.

At the upper end of this broader space, the gash in the mountain narrowed to a mere slash in the thousand-foot wall. Down this slash poured a white thread of water, shooting out many yards before it quieted down and became Gold Bar creek or river.

In a period of flood many years before, a prospector named Sawyer, long in the hills and starving, had taken a desperate chance on getting out by riding the slash of water on a log. When the flood ceased, his body was found at the foot of the falls. Thus had come the name Sawyers Chute.

Under the slash was what at first appeared to be a more regular pile of rubble rock. Closer inspection showed that it really was a house, and that part of the reared round rock formed a chimney.

The hundred yards of space separating the humble, makeshift cabin of Dave Timmons and, what for that region was the more ornate residence of Jud Harmon, was a desolation of piled small rocks. Each pile represented weeks, sometimes months of toil.

No place could have looked more barren. Yet that space between Dave's claim and the mountain wall had in its day yielded more than a million in gold. Washed down from the hills by the floods of centuries, most of the gold was in scattered small nuggets or in pockets among the rocks where it had been ground as fine as the finest sand, flour gold.

Dave's claim on the lower bar had yielded many rich pockets. It was said that Jud Harmon had been taking out more under Sawyers Chute. But Jud Harmon always was close mouthed. After his wife had died, he sent the girl out to school.

It was known Jud had gold. He spent it. But no one ever knew how much more Jud Harmon had than what he was known to spend. Old prospectors' tales hinted at a vein of gold in the mountain wall under Sawyer's Chute. Somewhere deep in the rocks ran the "mother lode" of the region, for all of the gold in the creek bars had been washed from some such strata.

Dan Timmons stood at the small

square of window facing up the canyon. He had told Dave to get some sleep, he would need it. The wounded deputy Carson had remained in a comatose state. He had not stirred in the bunk where Dan and Dave had placed him. Dan had dressed the wound.

It looked nip and tuck for the deputy. He was still breathing. His heart pulsed weakly. Dan knew the question of life or death for the man who had courageously sacrificed himself lay with his blood supply. If his veins had been too much drained, it would only be a question of a short time. Efforts to arouse Carson had brought no response.

Dan's problem was a knotty one. Up to this minute the canyon had given no evidence of life. The sun streaked down, touching the rocks, converting the precipitous walls around into areas of fog-filled shadow. They had abandoned the horses taken from the logging company corral a hundred yards below the cabin and come on in quietly.

Dan was sure that the cabin was the last place Scarlan would suspect them of being. That the moment they were discovered would be the signal for an attack. Whatever his underlying reason for wishing the brothers removed, Scarlan now had a greater motive for desiring their death.

If the truth of the killing of old Clay and the shooting of Deputy Carson became known, together with the hoax by which Scarlan had tricked the town of Spider Creek into pursuit of Dan and Dave, the crew of gangsters now undoubtedly sheltered by the stone house under Sawyers Chute could expect no mercy. For their own safety they would have to finish the job before Spider Creek learned the truth.

The truth lay with two persons. Deputy Carson knew part of it. He might die without regaining consciousness. Jud Harmon's girl by this

time must have guessed the rest of it, the facts of the killing of old Clay. She was a prisoner in the stone house.

Dan's gray eyes glinted to points as he studied the silent stones of the rubble house. If Dave had been correct and Jud Harmon was the instigator of the attempt to drive him out, that might count the girl out of it so far as defending them was concerned.

But Dan remembered the cool condemnation in Helen Harmon's eyes when she had faced him beside old Clay's body. He recalled her equally cool interference when his own life was in danger.

She'll tell the truth, he decided. As for Jud Harmon himself, Dan's mind was still looking for stray ends.

Carson moved in the bunk. He mumbled. Dan was beside him instantly, bending to catch his words.

"Burnin' up," murmured the wounded man. "For God's sake—gimme a drink—water—I'm chokin'—"

Dan looked at Dave. The latter shook his head, straightened up. Without a word he picked up his rifle and took down a canvas water bag from a hook on the wall.

"I'll get it," he said briefly.

"Wait a minute, Dave. Ain't there any in the cabin?"

"Told yuh, Dan, they diverted the creek. Nearest spring's t'other side. Be back in a jiffy."

"Water—for God's sake—"

Carson was delirious. His eyes were closed and he moaned.

DAN reached his hand for Dave's old-fashioned sixshooter. He laid it on the table and then he swiftly filled the magazine of his own automatic.

"I'm a heap better, Dave, with the one-hand guns. You always did favor a rifle," he explained simply.

Dave smiled. He knew all about Dan and his "one-hand guns." Down in the canyons of the city many of

the underworld members also knew.

"I'll cover you from the door, Dave."

"Maybe Scarlan's crowd's sleepin' off last night's jag," said Dave. "Ain't anyone moved yet."

Dave crossed the first pile of rubble, slid down out of Dan's sight. Dan studied the wall of the rubble house, alert for the first sign of movement. Dave was slipping over the loose, round rocks with a noiselessness that was a feat in itself. He came into view again, topping another heap of stones.

A rock loosened under his feet, rolled, cracked its way to the bottom of the pile. Dan could not see anyone come from the rubble house, for the door was around the corner and the wall toward him had only a small square of window.

But the crack of a rifle echoed from the mountain wall. It was followed quickly by two other shots. A little wisp of blue smoke drifted around the corner of the house.

Rocks clattered where Dave had just disappeared. Dan held his breath, waiting for his brother's rifle to talk. No sound came. Only ominous silence, and that was not like Dave.

Dave's old long-barreled sixshooter was in his right hand. Dan did not move or cry out. He watched the wisp of smoke drift up, fade away. Two men came together around the distant corner. They appeared heedlessly, talking so loudly that Dan could almost make out their words.

He neither steadied his arm nor apparently took aim. The two shots from the old hog's leg were like a man smacking his fist twice in the palm of his hand. The roar of the gun was one sound.

Neither man fell, but they both paused queerly in their advance, turned their faces toward each other, each reaching out his hand as though seeking some support. They caught hold of each other and leaning together they staggered back around

the corner of the house. Another man jumped out quickly, rifle at his shoulder and shooting in the direction of the cabin.

Dan fired again, and the rifleman dropped his weapon and clutched at his stomach. Then he sat down, bending double, swaying.

Dan waited. He slipped new cartridges into the old gun. The next move was up to Scarlan's man. They'd just been handed a dose of rank lead poison that would make the next man think twice before he stepped out and turned himself into a bull's eye for that deadly marksman at Dave's cabin.

A rifle belched from the Harmon window. Dan heard the slug plunk into the split log of the cabin door jamb.

"Pretty fair shootin'," he muttered. "Wonder if I can get over to Dave."

No, he couldn't do him any good just now, making himself a fair target for the rifle fire from the house. He figured Dave was down, perhaps dead, anyway, too badly hit to shoot.

"Gonna be plenty hell poppin' pronto," muttered Dan again. "Wonder if that posse's back in Spider Creek or some of 'em still hangin' around the trail?"

The sound of shooting would carry a long way on that thin mountain air. With the possibility of members of the posse coming down the trail behind the cabin and anyway eight or ten able riflemen in the Harmon house, Dan figured on the chance of being caught between two kinds of lead slinging hades.

Where was Helen Harmon? Had she heard the shooting? She must be in the house.

Dan's mind went to her. Only one shot had been fired from the window. Silence brooded again. The square pile of rock with its single chimney still housed plenty of sudden death. Dan wondered from which point it would

flame out next. Carson still mumbled.

"Water—water—I'm dyin'—"

His voice was stronger now. Dan took a chance on a hasty look.

Carson's eyes opened. He was conscious. His lips were swollen and his tongue moved thickly. But he recognized Dan.

"Dan Timmons—" he managed slowly. "Yuh brung me here. Y're square, Dan. Kin yuh gimme a drink?"

The wounded man was in agony. Dan looked around the cabin. Dave had the only water bag. The old tin pail wouldn't do. He must get that water bag, see what had happened to Dave.

"Be right back," he said cheerfully to Carson. "Hope I will," he whispered to himself.

Dave's old Colts in the one hand, his police forty-five in the other, Dan stepped from the cabin door. He started across the open rocks in the direction Dave had gone.

Ten paces, twenty paces. He climbed the first pile of rocks. The rubble house continued a square heap of menacing silence.

CHAPTER IX

LAW OF THE BULLET

TOPPING that loose pile of rocks Dan's tall figure afforded a shining mark, a target for gang rifles, boldly outlined.

Still no shot came. No movement. Twenty or thirty yards away Dan could see the pile of rocks over which Dave had rolled. Ominous silence there, too. Dan's face went a shade whiter. Lips that usually wore a crooked grin under stress became a straight line.

His right hand flashed up. Keen vision had detected the first flutter around the corner of the rubble house a hundred yards away. It was bright color in the sun, like a woman's dress

or scarf. It fluttered into view, disappeared.

Why were the Scarlan gangsters withholding their fire?

They would never have a better target, figured Dan. What were the killing devils cooking up now?

The truth of the dastardly trick burst upon Dan all at once. The color of the bright dress came into view again.

Helen Harmon herself. Walking erect but stiffly. Even at that distance, the girl seemed to be uncertain in her steps, feet fumbling over the rough rocks. And until she was a few yards from the rubble house, coming straight toward him, Dan was puzzled.

Then he saw why. The girl's hands were bound behind her. Around her eyes a scarf had been fastened, blindfolding her. One man guided her steps, keeping himself carefully protected by the girl's body.

Slowly the girl's figure and that of the man emerged. And then Dan swore bitterly, an oath seldom on his tongue. For close behind the helpless girl, a snake-like line came from the corner of the house.

Two, four, six men Dan counted in the procession. And the line weaved as each man kept his own body sheltered by the girl from the figure on the rocks. While they were walking toward Dan, the procession was veering a little to one side. Then Dan could see the whole idea.

About fifty yards away a pile of rocks had been formed into a low wall that ran across the canyon. Once they had gained that wall, the advancing gangsters could spread out, creep in different directions until they had gained vantage points completely surrounding Dave's cabin.

Dan dropped to one knee. At any instant he might expect one of the gangsters to take a chance, step out into the open and shoot. The line moved twenty yards toward him

without any demonstration. As the men walked, it had the effect of keeping the girl a shifting shield at the head of the procession.

Every nerve in Dan's body pulled his muscles taut. His brain fired with rage, flaming a red haze over his eyes. Then it cooled to icy determination that cleared his vision. His right hand tightened on the horn butt of Dave's reliable old sixshooter. His left hand shifted on the grips of the police forty-five, finger slipping the safety catch.

No shot had been fired. A harsh laugh came from one of the men in the line. They were mightily pleased with their cowardly trick. Another ten yards and the half dozen gangsters would be bulwarked behind the shoulder of rock. From that shelter they could riddle Dan at their leisure, or slip around and cut off his possible retreat.

Dan's eyes ceased to see the procession as a whole. They had focused on the vividly colored scarf, seeking around its edges for—

A man's shoulder protruding there, a hand farther back, even a pair of feet that weaved in and out.

At the beginning of that second Dan's two guns apparently hung limply at his side. In the middle of that same second they had snapped up, both muzzles mushrooming smoke and flame.

Helen Harmon could not have missed feeling the zipping wind of the leaden slugs. To the right and left of her head, within the fraction of an inch of her body, a stream of death for the girl if Dan's hands had trembled or his aim deviated to the slightest degree.

A man cried out a curse, his hand grabbing at his shattered shoulder, and instantly his hand was converted into a mangled mass of bullet torn blood and bone.

Another man groaned, sagged out of the line, a broken foot crumpling

under him. Another white hand that had been swinging was thrust upward with two fingers missing.

The procession that had been so confidently sure of its success was no longer advancing. One man leaped to one side, bringing his rifle up. He flung the gun forward with both hands, in the odd position of presenting arms. He had, to death.

The gangster holding the girl had escaped that amazing rain of bullets from the flaming sixshooter and automatic. Dan's crooked grin had come back now, as his brain registered each shot, counting and numbering the two bullets left in each gun.

Then he groaned. He must have missed one shot. God, why had he risked it? Better that he had taken his medicine. What a fool he had been to think he could get away with that. For the girl had collapsed.

Limply she slipped down, legs bending, sagging forward. The weight of her body dragged the man holding her forward, left him exposed. He yelled and let go the cord that had bound her wrists, getting a pistol into play.

Dan took the lead somewhere in his left arm. For he felt the police pistol slip from his fingers. The gangster's mouth spread in a grin of triumph and his throat let out a roar of derision. The old sixshooter jumped once in Dan's right hand and the gangster's front teeth vanished back in his throat as he gulped, spit and crashed on his face beside the girl.

THE man who had been wounded in the foot was shooting. Dan didn't care any longer. Beyond that pile of rocks his brother Dave was dead. He had taken a fool's chance. Suddenly he knew that when one of his vagrant shots must have hit the girl, he had removed all reason for caring whether he lived or died.

Dave's gun empty, he threw it aside. He got the police pistol with its last two bullets over into his right

hand and stood up. One of the six gangsters who had been behind the girl, the last unwounded, was on one knee taking careful aim. Dan pounded both slugs from the police pistol into him before he could fire. Then he started, staggering off the rock pile toward the body of the girl.

A shout from the rubble house. Scarlan himself. So he had waited, let his men take the brunt of the fighting, all the risk. Had stayed back there, probably for the moment dumbfounded as the lead had whistled over and around the girl, burning his coup to hell with hot death.

Shouting with maniacal fury he ran out, rifle gripped in both hands. City gangster that he was, he undoubtedly would have been more at home in the mouth of a dark alley with a sub-machine gun that couldn't miss. Out of bullets, Dan could only make all the haste possible toward the body of the girl.

At least he could die beside her, was Dan's vague idea.

Scarlan yelled again. He saw that Dan had dropped his guns. He read the truth. His victim was disarmed, helpless. Seeing this, Scarlan ran half of the hundred yards, rifle held ready. Then he paused deliberately, got down and rested one elbow.

"You interferin'—!" he shouted. "You'll take it now in the guts, damn you to hell!"

Dan had not seen the girl's body move. His gaze had been fixed on Scarlan, hoping he could beat the certain bullet. If he could only get close enough to lift Helen Harmon's hand once? Press his lips to it. Tell her he was sorry. Tell her, yes, that he had never loved any woman until now.

He set himself for the shock of Scarlan's shot, determined that no matter where it hit him, he would make it, go on to the girl. One bullet or a dozen, he would fight off death until he held her hand.

A shot rang out. Dan was confused,

dizzy from the wound in his left shoulder. The rocky ground between him and Scarlan was blurred. The shapes of the men's bodies, those wounded and those dead, wavered queerly.

Which made Dan believe he was dreaming. At the instant Scarlan had knelt so carefully to make sure of his death shot, Helen Harmon's hand had writhed loose from the cords, snatched the pistol of the gangster who had held her and fired. Scarlan's rifle exploded, but it was because it had struck the rocks as he fell. And unless Dan's eyes were playing him further tricks, the gang chief had a bullet hole squarely between his eyes. Dan's next minute of fighting off the dizziness that threatened to obscure everything was a bewildering sense of several unbelievable things happening. He had stumbled ahead, hands outstretched for the purpose of lifting the girl to her feet. Instead, he himself was being supported by the girl's arms.

And Dave was staggering over the rocks toward them, muttering, almost sobbing as he saw Dan lying on the ground. Partly across his forehead and one temple was a bullet furrow, the blow that had robbed him of consciousness.

"Morgan—Shaffroth—" Helen was saying. "They're in the house. They won't shoot. They're scared sick. My father's in the back room."

That got Dan's mind out of the haze.

"The water bag—Dave—where is it?"

"You can't," said the girl. "What do you mean?"

"Carson—in Dave's cabin—maybe dyin'—got to get 'im water—"

"Yes? Carson? Alive?—I'll get the water—"

She sprang to her feet.

"Take it easy, Dan," said Dave. "I'm feelin' just about ripe t' have a

talk with them fat varmints an'—Jud Harmon—"

"Easy, Dave boy," cautioned Dan. "We'll see to Carson first—then we'll both go prowlin' in this Harmon matter—you've gotta wrong slant some-eres, an'—"

Dan was getting up. His eyes shifted to the hill back of Dave's cabin. He interrupted what he was saying.

"Ain't either of us goin' just yet a spell, Dave. Have a look, sit tight an' let nature take its course."

Emerging from the old Gold Bar trail over Cougar mountain, a dozen or more grim-faced, weary men were filing around the corner of Dave's cabin.

"Hell an' calamity!" gasped Dave. "There's ol' Sheriff Calder himself from up Yreka way."

"Yeah," barked a dry, brittle voice. "An' you two hell bent hombres h'ist them hands. You're through an' done murderin' in these parts. Git 'em up!"

CHAPTER X

GOLD BAR TREASURE

THE quick rat-a-tat of three or four shots turned all eyes toward the rubble house. Sheriff Calder was in the act of stripping Dave of his cartridge belt.

"Git ahead yuh two, an' pronto!" he ordered. "'Pears like fur a peaceful community this 'ere locality's done gone hog wild."

Led by the sheriff, the possemen wedged into the narrow door of the rubble house. Two fat men, pistols still smoking, the eyes of one glowering and fear-filled and those of the other glazing rapidly in death, were on the floor.

Bound to a chair in the corner of the room sat a gaunt man, sunken cheeks bristling with the gray stubble of many days' neglect.

"Whatsis?" demanded the old sheriff. "Damamighty! Has this 'ere end

o' the county set out to exterminate itself?"

"He done it—I tell yuh—it was him—"

"Who's he, an' what's he done?" demanded the sheriff.

"Killed that old stage driver—him—that Morgan there—tried to put it on me—saw the jig was up—him an' me come up here with them fake injunction papers t' chase some bozo off'n his gold claim—he thought it'd be a helluva good idea t' bump off that stage driver an' pin it on the fellow that was in the stage—that Dan Timmons, the detective from San Francisco—him there—"

Shaffroth gestured with his trembling hand toward Dan.

The old sheriff whirled quickly.

"Why 'n the hell an' all didn't yuh say y' was Dan Timmons yuh pore ignorante?" he bellowed. "Whatcha doin' holdin' up yore hands? Hain't yuh got no sense?"

Dan dropped his hands meekly, eyes twinkling.

Shaffroth attempted to get to his feet, groaned and sat down again.

"Better put the cuffs on 'im, sheriff," interrupted the bound old man in the chair. "Reckon he's lyin', anyway, from what I heard 'em say, both of 'em was in on killin' old Clay Tobin. They're in with that Scarlan, the damned, dirty, gold-robbin' thief."

"What?" said Dave quickly. "What? You said—y'mean—"

He was across the room with one jump, knife out, sawing at the ropes around Jud Harmon's arms.

"Y'mean, Jud, yuh been a prisoner all the time—yuh wasn't in on this deal, huh?"

"Why, Davie," remonstrated Jud Harmon mildly, a deep hurt in his voice. "Yuh wasn't thinkin' I had anything t'do with what's been goin' on, was yuh?"

"Who? Me?" burst out Dave. "I should say I wasn't thinkin' anything

like that, Jud. Not for a minute, I wasn't."

Dan's eyes twinkled some more, but he didn't bat either one.

"He didn't mean it the way he asked it, Mr. Harmon," he added to Dave's denial. "Dave's been considerably mixed up, what with bein' ordered off his claim, robbin' stages, dodgin' lynchin' posses an' one thing an' another like that.

"**H**UH?" interposed Sheriff Calder. "Robbin' stages?"

He turned with a long, steady look into the eyes of the possemen from Spider City.

"Hain't any of yuh heered nothin' 'bout any stage bein' robbed anywhere, have yuh?"

"Naw sir," spoke up one of the men quickly. "Seems like the down river stage yesterday blowed outen a tire an' everybody started t' walk over the hill t' Spider City, causin' some considerable ruckus arter old Clay was killed as yuh heered by one of them varmints there. But there wa'n't no stage robbin'. Naw sir."

Dave's eyes widened as he looked at Dan. The latter merely dropped his left eye-lid and turned to Harmon.

"You called that Scarlan a gold thief, Mr. Harmon?"

"Yeah, an' I'm repeatin' it. He was recommended t' me to do some borin'. The danged skunk run onto my gold cache. Musta looked big t' him. He said he'd brought them other fellows t' help with the hole an' runnin' a tunnel. Drilled a hole down under the floor o' the house back there an' the second week they struck a vein. Let me see it, an' then they hopped onto me an' kept me tied up ever since.

"That there gold vein's a reg'lar lode, she is. Betcha it'll run a million or two. Trouble was, for Scarlan, most of the vein is down there under Dave's claim. That's why he was framin' that fake injunction an' them

two fake officers there to run Dave off. Reckon they was 'lowin' t' put me outa the way, too, but they heered my girl was comin' home. 'Lowed they'd git her, too. Yuh got that Scarlan an' them gangsters o' his, Sheriff?"

"Yeah," drawled the old sheriff. "They been got."

A quick, light step sounded outside. Face flushed from running, eyes bright, Helen Harmon appeared in the doorway.

"Oh, he's going to live—he's talkin'—tellin' how Dave an'—Mr.—an' Dave's brother packed him off the mountain—after he got some water—he's sittin' up—he isn't so badly hurt—he's—"

"Whope! Whope! Jest a minute, daughter," interrupted Jud Harmon. "Who's livin', talkin' about what, where?"

"Oh, don't you know, Daddy Jud? That brave deputy sheriff, Carson, Dave an'—"

"Prefer you'd call me Dan," he said quickly. "It'll be all right with me. But—I thought—I was sure you'd been hit out there—I thought I'd killed you—an' then, the first thing I know you're up to your old tricks with a sixshooter."

"I wasn't hurt, but I was some scared all right," said the girl. "I never expect to have bullets singing that close to my ears again and live. And you—you was so foolish—you kept coming straight toward me and that man Scarlan—I thought he would get you sure—why did you do that?"

Dan considered a minute.

"I was, well, I thought I'd killed you or hit you, an' you was dyin'," he blurted out. "You wanta know the truth, well, I was comin' to kiss your hand and beg your forgiveness.

Helen Harmon's face flamed, matching Dan's ears.

"You mean—why Mis—Dan! You don't have to kiss my hand, ever."

The Gunflash from Nowhere

By CLAUDE RISTER

Bandit Bob Darrell turns the corner and goes straight

AS HE rode down the crooked main street of the mining town of Oro, "Devil" Bob Darrell was as alert as a fox. A ghost of a contemptuous smile played about his straight lips, and a reckless light flashed in his keen black eyes.

It was like the nervy outlaw to ride during broad daylight into a place where there was a standing reward offered for his capture, dead or alive. Tired of a whole month of inactivity, Darrell had come to the rich gold camp in search of adventure, and perhaps loot.

The famed desperado was not known in the rich gold camp except by reputation and description. Reward circulars concerning him had been distributed throughout the country, but none of them carried his picture. Darrell many times had looked into the muzzles of six-guns, but never once into the eye of a camera.

With a confident swing of his sinewy, medium-sized body that amounted almost to a swagger, Darrell strode into the Hardrock Saloon. His huge gray Stetson was set at a rakish angle and the rowels of his silver-mounted spurs jingled musically.

No one paid him any particular attention as he stood for a moment at the head of the great room, flashing dark eyes covering the crowd with keen glances.

Seeing no familiar face, or law-badger, the outlaw strode to the bar and ordered beer. Darrell never drank

anything stronger than beer when among strangers.

Forever alert, he gazed into the bar mirror as he sipped his drink. He was sizing up the place, while continuing to study the crowd.

Suddenly his black eyes narrowed to gleaming slits. His darkly handsome face lost some of its bronze-color, and became stony hard. His nostrils paled and seemed to pull downward toward the pinched mouth. The sinewy right hand which had been toying with the beer glass, glided from the counter and found the sleek cedar butt of a Colt forty-five.

Darrell's burning dark eyes were focused upon a man whom he had not noticed before; a card dealer. He was seated at a table in the far end of the long room. The gambler was a wiry fellow, with beetling brows, a flat nose, and loose lips that now and then crawled into a sneering grin. He wore a black hat, blue shirt, and an ornately embroidered vest.

"Killer Branson!" Darrell spoke softly. "It shore is a small world!"

He had turned with a slow, gliding movement, and he now had his back to the bar. One boot-heel was hooked over the brass foot-rail. His elbows were upon the counter, brown hands drooping toward the butts of the heavy six-guns at his thighs.

For a minute he stood with head slightly lowered, gazing at the card dealer from under the rim of his hat-brim. The tense expression had left his clean-cut face, and the corners of

his thin lips were curled upward in a hard, devilish grin.

There was no mirth in that smile. It was more of a mocking, triumphant sneer. Such a smile as might have caused the loose-lipped gambler at the other end of the long room to turn pale, had he seen it.

In that minute Devil Bob Darrell was thinking of the past. Once he and Killer Branson had been partners, but the black hearted outlaw had played him a dirty trick.

SOME two years before, down in the Brimstone Mountain country, Darrell had met up with Branson at a moment when the fellow had been sorely wounded, and hard pressed by a posse, following a bank holdup.

Darrell had taken the man to his secret hiding place and had doctored his wounds. For a few weeks thereafter, he and Branson had ridden the outlaw trails together. One day Branson had perpetrated the cowardly deed for which Darrell had sworn to get him.

The law had been hot on the trail of the two men. They had fled into a range of desert hills. Branson's horse had been wounded, and finally had collapsed. Darrell had taken the man up behind him and had ridden on.

It soon had become evident to the two men that mounted double upon Darrell's pony, they could not hope to outride the posse. Darrell therefore had suggested that they stop and fight it out with their pursuers. The cunning Branson, however, had thought of a better scheme—better for himself. Two men loaded upon a single pony could not outrun the posse, but one might.

Branson had slugged Darrell from behind with a six-shooter, and then had fled.

Darrell had quickly recovered from the blow and had hidden within a crevice of a dead lava flow. The possemen, not noticing that the human load

of the pony which they were pursuing had been lightened, had ridden on after Branson.

Soon night had fallen. Darrell had crawled from his hiding place and had begun a long, maddening trek toward a distant oasis. It had been only by sheer grit and remarkable stamina, that he at last had dragged himself in to the oasis, half crazed from thirst.

Following that experience, Darrell had sworn henceforth to ride alone.

Ardently he had hoped that some day he would meet the treacherous Killer Branson again. That time now had come.

IT WAS not until Darrell was within ten feet of the card table that Branson chanced to look up and see him. The big, hairy hands paused in the act of dealing. The heavy lips became slack, and the swarthy face turned pale.

For a moment the two men gazed into each other's eyes, and then Darrell said very softly: "Well, Branson, here we are."

There was something in his drawl that was suggestive of steel blades raking together.

He still was smiling but the patrons of the card game detected something sinister behind that mirthless grin. Hurriedly they deserted the table and backed away, their eyes fixed upon the lean, tanned face in a fascinated manner.

The only player who had not got up was a squirrel-faced man who sat near Branson's right elbow. Darrell knew that practically every crooked gambler keeps a helper planted in his game. He guessed that the slim, hard-jawed, pinch-faced man was Branson's partner and personal bodyguard. There was something about the skinny fellow's claw-like fingers, and within the expression of the hard-cruel visage that marked him as a killer.

Branson cast a glance at Squirrel-face, gathered courage, and tried to bluff out the situation. "Who are you, stranger?" he demanded in a deep, growling voice. "I don't know yuh a-tall. What yuh mean by that there remark of yores?"

Darrell's white teeth gleamed in the lamplight. "I reckon they ain't no use talkin' that a-way, Branson."

His voice was gentle, but it seemed to send chills down the spine of the burly gambler. "I been sorter lookin' for you, ever since we parted comp'ny down in the Brimstone country two year ago."

"Two year ago me an' this gent lived in the same mining town up in Idyho," Squirrel-face suddenly barked. "I know fer a fack he didn't leave that country once durin' the whole year. Fu'ther-more yuh got the wrong pig by the tail! His name's Williams, not Branson! What's yore game, anyway?"

The man had spoken for the benefit of the crowd.

"Here! Here!" Darrell exclaimed in the same low, velvety voice. "What yuh gettin' so excited about? Yuh ain't in on this discussion a-tall. Not unless yuh're doin' his fightin', as well as helpin' him cheat the customers."

His glittering black eyes turned back to Branson's surly face. The mirthless smile suddenly tightened down to a gritted snarl. "Stand up, Killer Branson!" he bit off. "I'm hankerin' tuh see if yuh can use a gun as well when a fella's facin' yuh, as yuh can when he's lookin' the other way."

Branson's fingers were playing with the deck of cards. His hands remained within plain sight, but Darrell knew that the tricky fellow had nudged his bodyguard with the toe of one boot. The skinny gunman took the cue.

"Call me a card cheat, huh!" he yapped, as he sprang to his feet.

His chair tipped backward. Before

it struck the floor his six-shooter had cleared leather. It exploded, but the bullet ripped harmlessly through the top of the table and chugged into the floor. His weapon fell from his grasp. He slapped his left hand upon his right wrist and let out a lurid stream of profanity. His left thumb was almost entirely shot away.

Without even crouching, and seemingly without taking his slitted eyes from Branson's evil face, Darrell had flashed a six-gun.

"Git out!" he snapped at Squirrel-face. "If yuh're spoilin' for trouble yuh can have it later! My business right now is with Killer Branson!"

Squirrel-face gave him a murderous look, and then slunk away toward the front door, still gripping his right wrist and cursing.

"Sorter puttin' on airs, ain't yuh?" Darrell told Branson. "Riggin' yoreself up as a gambler. Even got yoreself a pet killer tuh do yore gunnin'. Well, now that he's out of the way, I reckon it's you an' me, man tuh man. Stand up Branson, an' pull yore hardware."

Branson licked his loose lips, and then said huskily: "Yuh got the advantage. Yuh're all set, an' everything. I ain't even shore my gat's loaded. Besides, this here room is full of people. If we start slingin' lead we might kill half a dozen bystanders."

Darrell nodded curtly. "Reckon yuh're right, coyote. Git out the back way. I'll leave by the front. That'll give yuh time tuh inspect yore iron. We'll walk around the east side of the house toward each other, an' will start shootin' on sight.

"You can leave first," he added significantly.

Branson rose from his chair. One dark look he shot at Darrell from under his beetling brows, and then he turned and walked toward the back door. His hairy hands were fingering the points of his embroidered vest, well away from his hips.

Without a single backward glance he disappeared through the rear door. Darrell then turned and made toward the front entrance. He glided swiftly along, moving slightly sidewise, his eyes still fixed upon the spot where Branson had disappeared. He was taking no chances of being shot in the back.

OUT on the board sidewalk Darrell paused for a moment. He wanted to play the grim game absolutely fair, although he knew that Branson deserved no such treatment.

He went to a corner of the big frame building and peeped around it. Branson was nowhere in sight. This surprised him a little.

"I reckon the skunk's hidin' behind the house, waitin' for me to come after 'im," he thought. "Well, he shore ain't gonna have tuh wait long."

With fingers curled, ready to snatch the two sagging guns at his hips, he started bow-legging his way toward the rear of the building. As he neared the corner which he reasoned Branson would be watching, he became more cautious.

He took a few careful steps on tip-toes, paused, listened, and then suddenly sprang.

His guns left their holsters while he was still in the air. His lithe body twisted like that of a cat, but there was no crash of gunfire. Branson was not behind the house.

Again Darrell was surprised. Had his enemy deliberately run out of the fight? Or had he gone around the west side of the building?

He slipped to the next corner. Still he did not find Branson.

Darrell went back to the board sidewalk and looked up and down the street. He then re-entered the gambling house, passed out through the back door and began a wider search.

A minute later he came out of a saloon and found himself suddenly

face to face with a lank man who wore the badge of a town marshal.

Darrell stopped abruptly. An almost imperceptible move he made toward his two guns, and then he relaxed. "Howdy," he greeted the officer, almost defiantly.

"Howdy yoreself," returned the marshal, "still lookin' for that gambler?"

"Maybe. Who wants tuh know?" Darrell grinned. He always grinned in the face of a new adventure.

"Just wanted to tell you that he'd left town," explained the marshal. "He went to the liv'ry, saddled his cayuse, and hit the grit."

The two men studied each other for a moment, while Darrell rounded a cigarette into shape and felt for a match. The marshal produced one, popped a light with his thumbnail, and held it out for the outlaw's use. Darrell leaned forward and drew against the flame. For a moment his devilish black eyes looked deep into the hard blue ones of the other man.

"I don't want to seem over-inquisitive," the officer stated quietly, "but I'm wonderin' where you're from an' who you are?"

Darrell exhaled a thin cloud of rushing smoke, and answered coolly. "I'm just plain John Doe, from nowhere."

The marshal eyed him for another moment, and then remarked: "Handy with your hardware, eh? I didn't see that little ruckus at the Hardrock, but the boys tell me you showed both sand and speed. I'm willin' to believe 'em. Any jasper who can outdraw Skinny Kincaid, and can run his partner plumb out of town, ain't no hot air peddler. That tinhorn gambler was supposed to be about the niftiest gunman in these parts. And Kincaid, his bodyguard, was said to be a close second.

"How would you like to have a job?" he broke off abruptly.

Darrell's straight brows lifted as

suspicion shot through his mind. "What kinda job?"

"Guardin' a stage."

The outlaw's unfathomable smile returned. "We-e-el, I don't know," he said slowly.

"Come over to my office," the marshal invited. "I'll tell you all about it."

ON THE way to the office the marshal explained that both Branson and his squirrel-faced bodyguard were practically strangers in Oro. They had drifted into town about a week before. Under the fictitious name of Zack Williams, Branson had been dealing blackjack at the Hardrock.

The officer prudently refrained from interrogating Darrell as to the cause for his quarrel with Branson. In that country it was not wise for one to ask many questions.

Inside the marshal's office the two men sat down at a battered table. The officer was thoughtful for a moment, and then of a sudden he inquired:

"Did you ever hear of Devil Bob Darrell, the hell-bustin' desperader?"

A shock went through the outlaw's well-formed body. Not so much as by the flicker of a dark eyelash, however, did he reveal his inner feelings. The thin lips continued to smile, and the lean, handsome face remained calm of expression.

"Yeh," he replied easily. "I heard of 'im down Rio way. A right active outlaw, they say."

"Active? Say, that coyote has become so ornery the stages have had to quit operatin' temporary. They've been held up six times within the past month. Darrell was plenty bad when he played a lone hand, but now that he has a gang at his back he has become a scourge. It used to be he played the good badman; now he murders and robs promiscuous."

The desperado's smile vanished. Here was news. Some outlaw band had been at work. Their crimes were

being charged to him. He never had robbed promiscuously. He never had shot a man without giving him an even break. And he certainly never had ridden with a gang.

"It's sorter strange, this fella, Darrell, becomin' so plumb dirty-bad all of a sudden," he reasoned. "Do yuh reckon there's some mistake? That maybeso he's catchin' the blame for somebody else's crimes?"

"Possible, but not likely," the marshal returned. "Oh, it's him all right. He allus was a reckless hellion, and now when his gang stages a holdup he announces his identity plumb open and defies the law to catch him."

"What is he like, this braggin' badman?" inquired Darrell. A steely ring had crept into his voice.

The marshal took a paper from a drawer of his table and handled it to the outlaw. It was a reward circular. Darrell read a fairly good description of himself.

"Trouble with that layout is, it's too general," the officer went on. "Fits dozens of men I know. Don't think much of descriptions, nohow. Darrell works fast. He leaves his victims so flabbergasted they give conflictin' reports when it's all over."

"That's why I'm offerin' you the job," the marshal went on. "The company can't keep its stages idle no longer. They've got to go through. Oro is a mighty prosperous gold camp and shipments are heavy."

"The boys who witnessed the ruckus in the Hardrock say you're reckless, flashy with yore irons, and a straight shooter. That's just the kind of man I've been asked to find to ride the tail of a stage out of this town tomorrow. Pegleg Jake Hamilton, one of the nerviest old lead-slingers in the country, is goin' to set beside the driver. You and him would make a fine pair of guards. What say? Are you on?"

Darrell thought fast. Doubtless the stages often carried heavy shipments

of gold. What an opportunity to make a big clean-up, single handed! Besides, there was a chance that the murdering bandit leader would attempt with his gang to rob the stage. Darrell was anxious to meet the man who had been using his name.

The shrewd outlaw's suspicions were not entirely allayed. He half suspected a trick somewhere, but with characteristic audacity he decided to take a chance.

"I want to warn you that this stage ridin' is dangerous business," the marshal spoke again. "You'd run a big risk of bein' murdered. Four guards have been killed already. They were shot in cold blood, without even bein' given a chance to throw 'em up. Old Pegleg Jake is the only man I've been able to find who's nervy enough to take a chance on ridin' that schedule through tomorrow."

"Yeh?" Darrell drawled with a grin, "well, Marshal, yuh've found another one."

BY NOONTIME the stage had entered the badlands. By one o'clock it had reached the edge of outlaw country. By mid-afternoon it was lumbering along, deep within that wilderness of rocky, brushy hills known as Desolation Range."

Darrell had become more watchful as the trip progressed. Desperado that he was, familiar with every phase of outlaw tactics, he reasoned that if the stage was to be held up, attack might now be expected at any moment.

Suddenly he muttered an exclamation and leaned over an edge of the stage coach. His brown right hand was upon the butt of a six-gun. There was a light of discovery in his alert black eyes.

The stage just then was traveling along the edge of a low canyon wall. Ahead, the trail made a deep horeshoe bend, and came back down a wash that coursed the bed of the shallow canyon. There in the gulch, at a spot

where the road crossed a rocky, brushy draw, Darrell was quite sure he had glimpsed a movement.

He transmitted his discovery to Bill Carruthers, the driver. The stage was brought to a halt. A short consultation was held, and then the journey was resumed. Its four occupants now were tense and grim. With nerves keyed to the highest, they watched for the almost certain appearance of a band of masked men.

THE stage swept around the horse-shoe bend, rumbled down into the canyon, and approached the crossing. Old Bill Carruthers drew his six-shooter and held it poised. Pegleg Jake cocked both hammers of his sawed-off shotgun. Darrell gripped the butts of his twin pistols, while his dark eyes flashed watchful glances here and there. Down in the belly of the coach, a grizzled old rancher with eyes like hailstones held a worn, single-action Colt ready for instant use.

Even the half-tamed bronchos which were drawing the swaying vehicle, seemed to catch the excitement of the moment. Their eyes showed both black and white. From their distended nostrils issued frightened snorts, as they took the declivity that led into the rugged ravine. Eager to get out of the wash and onto the smoother ground beyond, they stretched their sinewy legs and tough little bodies into a swifter gallop.

No masked faces appeared. No horsemen came charging from the brush. No shots crashed out from hidden places. The stage whisked across the ravine and onto a stretch of trail beyond. The four bronchos settled down to an easy lope.

Bill Carruthers and Pegleg Jake looked at each other and drew sighs of relief. Soon they began to joke Darrell about being "skittish." Not a sign of a robber had they seen.

The stage was approaching a spot where brush and gigantic boulders

squeezed down close to the trail, when of a sudden Darrell flirled around and threw himself flat upon the upper platform. Turning his head to fling back a good-natured retort at the two jibing old-timers on the front seat, he had glimpsed several riders spur suddenly into the open.

There sounded a crash of gun-thunder. The bandits had fired without warning and without mercy. The blast of lead fairly swept Bill Carruthers and Pegleg Jake Hamilton from the front seat.

Pegleg slumped sidewise, riddled with bullets. But with his last gasp of life a final fighting spark flared in the nervy old gunfighter's heart.

Even as he toppled from the seat his spasmodically curled fingers jerked at the hammers of the sawed-off shotgun. A whistling storm of buckshot tore into the band of masked riders. One of them was knocked from his saddle. Another went down yelling hoarsely, wounded and pinned beneath a floundering horse.

Bill Carruthers had fired one shot and then had dropped his heavy Colt and toppled over sidewise in the seat. A moment later his lifeless body jostled off and fell to the ground.

Darrell had jerked both of his six-guns free as he had flattened himself on top of the coach. They began flaming. A hail of lead was tearing the air above him. In the coach the gray-haired rancher was firing his old service single-action pistol through an opening in the door.

TERRORIZED by all the shooting, the bronchos bolted before any of the masked men could get hold of the lines. Madly they raced down the rocky trail. The outlaws came in pursuit, riding and shooting wildly.

Stretched out on top of the stage, Darrell returned their fire, but the vehicle was bouncing and careening so that it was impossible for him to shoot with precision. He emptied both

his six-guns and then began reloading.

The run-away horses rounded another bend of the trail. Again the stage coach was skimming along the edge of a steep slope. It whipped around a sharp curve. The gravelly soil gave way beneath two wheels. Darrell felt the vehicle keel over.

He threw himself over the end handrail on the platform. As he struck the ground more or less on his feet, he saw the coach turn over. The plump body became detached from the tongue and the four-horse team. The terrorized bronchos went tearing up the trail, while the coach started tumbling down the slope, smashing bushes and precipitating a small landslide as it rolled.

Darrell tumbled head over heels, all the way to the bottom of the embankment, without being able to regain his feet. He ended up in a patch of bushes at the edge of a ravine, scratched and bruised, but otherwise unhurt. He still was holding his six-guns.

He sprang to his feet, just in time to see the coach crash into a bunch of springy willows beside a small stream. It came to a stop with its four wheels spinning in the air. At that instant the hard riding bandit gang swept around the bend on the trail above.

The outlaws plowed to a stop, and started down the loose-soiled slope in stiff-legged descent. A lank, grizzled old man with white eyebrows and a long brown face crawled from the capsized stage-coach and began firing.

One masked desperado toppled from his saddle. The freed mount turned sidewise, tried to get back up the slope, and threw several of the other ponies into confusion.

There were five of the outlaws left. They came on toward the wrecked stage, firing as they moved. They were in no situation for accurate shooting, however, and their bullets went wild. The old rancher was sending a hot

stream of lead into their midst, but they could not have turned back had they cared to. The loose soil on the hillside was bringing their ponies down the slope like so many logs upon a sluggish stream.

Darrell was quick to see the momentary advantage. Uttering a yell he sprang from the bushes and charged straight toward the on-coming horsemen. He held his fire until he was right at the foot of the slope in front of the sliding cavalcade. There he stopped, crouched low, and cut loose.

Each of his six-shooters voiced one loud, prolonged roar. A bullet knocked him to his knees, but he kept up his devastating fire. The old ranchman, too, was still popping away.

Three of the masked horsemen fell from their saddles and came rolling limply down the slope.

THE two remaining masked riders had hurled themselves free from their saddles as their ponies had lurched into an avalanche of bodies and flailing legs. Since they both had been on an outer edge of the mad melee, they had not been caught in the wild scramble. They picked themselves up from the bushes at the brink of the little stream, leaped over a bluff and fled down the draw.

The gray-haired old cattleman began shoving fresh cartridges into his heavy pistol. Darrell holstered his own empty forty-fives, and jerked a blunt six-shooter from under his shirt.

Although the two men whom he had seen leap over the embankment were masked, he felt certain he knew their identity. Unless he was greatly mistaken they were Branson and the squirrel-faced Kincaid. The fact that one of them had a bandaged right hand, partly confirmed his belief. Darrell had almost shot off Kincaid's thumb at the Hardrock Saloon.

Leaping into the draw he sped after the two killers.

They must have heard him coming, for as he suddenly turned a bend of the creek he came upon them, crouched within a wide pocket of a rocky bluff.

Three guns spoke as one. The man with a bandaged right fist had fired left handed, and his bullet went a little wide. It merely scorched the skin of the side of Darrell's neck. In the same instant the fellow slumped limply, dead even as his knees buckled.

The other cornered gunman's aim was better. Even though Darrell swayed his body aside to make him miss, he felt a deadening blow upon his right shoulder.

His six-shooter dropped. Desperately he went for the weapon with his left hand. The bandit would have killed him then and there, had it not been that the highwayman's gun had gone empty. He had not had time to reload.

Twice came the steely snap of a falling gun-hammer. The bandit then dropped his six-shooter and threw up his hands. "Don't shoot!" he yelled. "I give up!"

"Off with that mask!" snapped Darrell, as he covered the fearful man with the blunt six-gun which he had retrieved with his left hand.

The bandit hesitated, and then reluctantly obeyed. "I thought so!" sneered Darrell, at sight of Killer Branson's brutal face.

For a moment the two men glared at each other. Branson's beetling brow had dropped low over his close-set eyes.

"Snake," he said in his soft, menacing drawl, "right here's where you an' me has it out. Pick up your gun an' re-load. No tricks. I got yuh covered, an' I'll pull the trigger if yuh flicker an eyelash."

Sullenly Branson obeyed. With fingers that now were steady he began punching out the empty shells and refilling the empty chambers of his heavy Colt with fresh cartridges.

"When yuh're through yuh can hol-

ster it," Darrell directed in the same flat voice. "We'll then lift our hands.

The muzzle of Branson's gun suddenly came up and vomited flame. Always tricky, he had jerked the six-shooter to a level and pulled the trigger.

Darrell had not been caught off guard. His sharp eyes saw the killer's right wrist twitch, and within that split second his blunt Colt roared a message of death.

A slug of lead tore up the gravel between Darrell's widely set feet. His own bullet drilled a level hole right through the center of the treacherous desperado's head.

For a moment Devil Bob Darrell stood looking down at the sprawled forms of the two slain gunmen. Of a sudden his dark eyes glittered. The Well Fargo treasure box! It was his for the taking! The gray-haired rancher would be easy to dispose of!

The next moment the smile disappeared, and he slowly shook his head. "Nope; that ain't no way tuh play the game," he muttered. "'Tain't accordin' tuh the code I've always followed."

IT WAS true that Devil Bob Darrell had robbed stages, but this case was a little different. There was a matter of trust involved.

"Wal, what now?" he heard a quiet voice drawl.

Turning, he saw the gray-haired old cattleman, squatted upon his spurs on the bank of the ravine.

"Guess yuh'd better dress my wounds," said Darrell, "then we'll round up them runaway ponies, pack the strongbox on one of 'em, an' head back tuh Oro."

The rancher came down the embankment and set to work, binding Darrell's wounds with strips torn from a clean bandanna and a neckscarf.

"By the way, young fella, who are yuh?" he suddenly inquired.

Darrell tensed, but the next mo-

ment his old reckless smile appeared. "I'm John Doe, from nowhere a-tall," he answered. "Why?"

"A gunflash from nowhere, eh?" mused the rancher. "Wal, it just occurred to me that mebbe we'd met before. Yuh see I was a passenger on a certain stage that was held up by Devil Bob Darrell, over in Brimstone Gulch six months ago."

"Yeh? Well, what yuh gonna do about it?"

The rancher shrugged. "Me? Not a durned thing. None uh my business.

"Listen, partner," he added earnestly, "I need a young fella like you to sorter boss things at my ranch, over in Nevady. What say?"

Boring black eyes met penetrating gray ones. "Whatcha mean by that offer?" the outlaw demanded almost fiercely. "Yuh know damned well I'm Bob Darrell!"

"Mebbeso, mebbe not," the old rancher returned evenly. "I ain't inquirin' into yore past. Accordin' to what the marshal at Oro has been sayin', it was Devil Bob's gang which was holdin' up the stages. That bein' the case, Darrell is now dead. Let him stay dead, savvy?"

"I got an idee," he went on, "yuh've been a rip-snorter more because yuh love excitement than for any other reason. Well, son, I can offer yuh all the excitement yuh want. At my Crooked Arrow ranch there are rustlers, an' range troubles to contend with, to say nothin' of a bunch of gun-slingin' cowhands who are mighty hard to handle."

An eager light burned in Darrell's dark eyes. "Do you think I'd make good on that job?" he inquired earnestly.

The rancher's gray eyes twinkled. "I'm willin' to take a chance if you are," he replied.

Darrell's white teeth flashed in a smile. "Yuh've hired yoreself a cowhand, ol'-timer," he declared.

Eyes of the Night

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

Two waddies fight it out

THE hands of Jess Williams and Steven Hellman fell to their hips. Then they grinned sheepishly. They had forgotten that the owner of the homestead at the foot of the Three Devils, on Sagebrush Flat, had made it mandatory that they discard their firearms before he would hire them.

They had been the best of friends. They had slept together, ridden the upland ranges together, had been as brothers since they had first met, some eleven years before, when they had served as high privates in the rear rank of an Army Replacement Company which missed overseas duty by the grace of some ten days, the Armistice spoiling their lust for combat.

The light in a woman's eyes had made them enemies.

She was the daughter of a pair who were passing through, and who had pitched camp along the highroad, under the shadow of the two hundred foot precipice which bordered the west side of George Devor's homestead. Her name was Anna Sweet, and she had been everywhere and seen everything. The figure of girlish grace, blue-eyed, dark brown hair, she was about twenty years of age. Altogether about the prettiest bit of femininity Jess or Steve had ever seen.

The camp of Old Man Sweet and his family had been made late yesterday evening, and the girl had been constantly in the company of Williams and Hellman, and had smiled—and

what a smile!—impartially upon the two ex-waddies.

Her smiles had done things to them besides making them enemies.

"She makes your heart do flip-flops with that smile," Jess told himself.

"Just watch her walk and you feel like lettin' her walk all over you," said Hellman to himself.

Neither had spoken aloud, but each seemed to have understood what was in the mind of the other. Thus that instinctive reach for the absent revolver butts.

"Tell me, Mr. Hellman," she said sweetly, shading her eyes from the afternoon sun, which was just trying to hide itself behind the cliff to the west, "about rattlesnakes. You say this coulee is full of them. Do they ever bite themselves, and if so, does it kill them?"

But it was Williams who answered.

"Do they! Yes, I mind I teased one once until he bit hisself. He died in agony in about a hour, puffed up like a poisoned pup!"

"If you want to hear about rattlers, Miss," said Hellman, "let me tell you: see that bench across the coulee?"

Hellman pointed to the walls on the east, walls which stretched along the entire side of the homestead from whose owner Hellman and Williams drew their pay. It averaged about five hundred feet in height, and ran from where the Three Devils led down into Moses Coulee from Ephrate way, to where the smaller Steamboat Coulee

went back from the main coulee, a great gash in the solid rock, called "steamboat" because there was a huge detached rock right in its mouth, a rock which looked like a steamboat just emerging from the cleft.

Midway between the Three Devils and Steamboat Coulee was another break in the walls; but the floor of this coulee-like place was over a hundred feet above the floor of the coulee proper, a great scar in the wall which was like a bench, except that it ran back from Moses Coulee for about a mile, ending in a cul-de-sac. This huge bit of stone-walled tableland was choked with service berry, brush and quaking aspens, a matted tangle that that seemed impenetrable.

Just now, as Hellman pointed, the winds which roar up the coulee from far Columbia River Valley was ruffling the leaves of the nearest aspens, turning the silver undersides of the countless leaves toward the watchers, making all the tangled wall of greenery look silvery, and somehow depressing. At the foot of the forest of trees, where rank grasses reached to unusual heights in their fight for air and sunlight, the winds whipped the grasses almost straight over, so that their tips pointed into the tangle, as though both grasses and trees beckoned to the watchers, bidding them come investigate the mystery of the shadowed mass.

Anna Sweet drew in her breath sharply.

"It looks pretty," she said. "but it gives me the shivers, somehow."

"Nobody ever goes in there," said Williams hurriedly, as though unwilling for Hellman to talk uninterruptedly with the girl, "'cause they're afraid of snakes! There's supposed to be millions of the critters in there! And at night, when something disturbs them, the wildcats go crazy in there and make noises like whole droves of screamin' women on the rampage!"

"Have either of you boys ever been in there?" asked Anna.

Williams started to answer, but Hellman beat him to it.

"I have," he said. "I rode my buckskin, Spot, because he can smell rattlers a mile away and won't go near them! If you went in there with Spot, and only Spot could make it, 'cause you have to climb the shale, and scale about thirty feet of hardrock that's almost straight up, you'd be safe, for Spot wouldn't go near the snakes. But if you got caught in there at night—"

Hellman left the rest of his observation to the imagination.

The girl shuddered. But her eyes held on that tangled mass of greenery, which filled the great bench, some of it drooping weary arms over the ledge of the cliff that fell away to the coulee floor.

And for some reason conversation died away. The girl made one observation before she excused herself to Williams and Hellman.

"I'd sure like to go into that place, just for the thrill of it; but I wouldn't go alone for all the gold in Christendom!"

"Nor I wouldn't go in for anything on this earth!" said Williams.

"I might," said Hellman slowly, "but it would have to be a case of life or death—to someone I loved!"

The girl looked queerly at the two men. When she had turned her back upon them she smiled a secret smile to herself.

Williams and Hellman went to the shack, where the wife of the homesteader was getting ready to get supper, and wished silently that Sweet and his wife, and daughter, especially the daughter, would come in after supper and talk until midnight, all night for that matter, as they had talked last night, when Anna had made slaves of Hellman and Williams—slaves to her smile that was tinged with mystery.

To herself Anna admitted that she

liked both men. But above all things she loved the thrills which life had to offer, and Moses Coulee seemed filled with promise. Since her dad was to leave at sunup next morning, she had to work fast for her thrills.

HELLMAN and Williams had scarcely settled themselves with a pair of paper-backed novels, which they pretended to read, when Old Man Sweet came tearing into the shack, scared half out of his wits, gesticulating like an electioneer, calling upon Williams and Hellman, and their boss, to help him bring back a daughter who seemed to have taken leave of her senses.

Williams and Hellman hurried to the door, looked off across the coulee floor in the direction indicated by the pointing finger of Old Man Sweet.

Well up the talus slope leading to the forbidding, aspen-clogged bench, rode a lithe figure on a buckskin horse! Even at that distance neither of the waddies had any difficulty in making out the khaki breeches clad Anna Sweet.

The buckskin was making rough going of the precipitous ascent, the shellrock cascading back as he scrambled in jumpy stages up toward the slippery bit of hardrock which gave upon the bench. The sound of the sliding talus echoed throughout the coulee.

Hellman shouted frantically to the girl; but with the noise the buckskin was making she couldn't have heard the sound of a cannon, echo as it surely would.

But she was an expert horsewoman, and Spot was a sure-footed animal, possessed of courage and intelligence.

Anna reached the crest of the cliff. Hellman himself, long before, had made that same ascent, and had looked back at the top, catching his breath as he saw the utter impossibility of returning the same way and keeping the saddle. He knew the fear that

clutched the girl as she looked back.

But when she paused up there for the buckskin to have a breathing space, Hellman shouted again, Hellman, Williams and Sweet waved and jumped frantically about, shouting to her to come back, or wait at the crest until someone came to help her return over the sliding, dangerous talus.

Anna's answer was a nonchalant wave of the hand. Then she turned and vanished into the quaking aspen. Hellman knew, of course, that it was not as matted and tangled as, from a distance it appeared to be; but just the same it was no place for either human being or horse, this late in the afternoon.

It was true, however, that Spot was rattlesnake wise, and that Anna was safe as long as she kept her saddle.

Hellman doubted, and told his doubts to Williams, whether the courage of Anna would stand up under the gloomy shadows under the aspens long enough for her to explore the miniature jungle on the huge bench.

"Wait'll the wildcats begin to yowl, and she'll wish she'd listened to us! However, we needn't worry. She'll go into the aspens a ways, until she loses the world behind her and silence settles down, 'ceptin' for the rattling of the snakes, and the unseen cats slipping under the brush, and it's my bet she won't waste much time getting back out!"

Hellman decided to give Anna twenty minutes before they went looking for her, and held his watch in hand while the minutes ticked off, and the three men, the homesteader and his wife added, watched for the girl to appear at the crest.

"Twenty minutes up, folks," said Hellman grimly. "I'm going."

"But there ain't no other horse 'cept Spot could climb up there, and a man on foot has about one chance in a million of goin' through without gettin' bit!"

"The girl's up there," replied Hellman quietly.

He took a flash light, a revolver, and plenty of matches, and slipped on the hightopped boots the hands used when working in sagebrush, and started across the coulee, across whose floor the shades of evening were almost entirely reaching. Darkness would fall very shortly.

They gave him twenty minutes after he had scaled the talus and vanished into the tangled mass of service berry and aspen.

Then Old Man Sweet turned to Williams.

"One of us better go," he said diffidently.

"Well," retorted Williams bluntly, "you're her dad, ain't you?"

Without a word, without betraying his thoughts by so much as a sidewise look, Old Man Sweet strode across the coulee floor, and Williams watched him until he too vanished into the mass, which now was black and forbidding because the sun was almost down.

Then, after waiting an interminable time, after noting that the homesteader and his wife were regarding him questioningly, and the wife seemed on the point of taking up the search herself, Williams, his face as pale as death, strode across the coulee floor on the trail of the vanished three.

"Mary," said the homesteader to his wife, "we've got three kids, this silly Anna ain't no claim upon us, an—"

"No, George," interrupted his wife, "all we can do is wait, and hope they all get out."

MEANWHILE, because she had taken a mute dare that no one had offered her, foolish Anna Sweet was going through to the bitter end. She believed what Hellman had told her of the snake wisdom of Spot, and had no fear of either snakes or wildcats. The latter, she knew, were cowardly.

Only thing they would do was scare you with their caterwauling, and they wouldn't start until darkness fell. She had time, therefore, to go through the grove and find what lay beyond, back of the grove, at the far side of the bench where, as far as the world knew, no one had ever been except Hellman.

She reckoned without the setting sun, the predilection of rattlesnakes for roaming after darkness. She expected to get back before dark.

She hurried on through, bending now and again to escape the limbs of the nodding, whispering quaking aspens which almost shut out the skies above her, filling the underbrush and the grove with shadow.

Far ahead of her she heard the cawing of a crow, the shrill chatter of a group of magpies.

It gave her an eerie feeling.

Spot lifted his head suddenly, set his ears to the front, stopped dead still and refused to move. A cold chill touched the spine of Anna Sweet. She broke a dried twig from an aspen, threw it into the tangle before her.

Instantly there came the metallic warning of one of the world's most deadly reptiles!

Anna smiled to herself. This horse, Spot, was a creature to tie to. They made a brief half circle, Spot showing himself willing when Anna allowed him to make a detour. No trail anywhere, just haphazard aisles through the aspens and the shadows.

Rapidly they passed through the aspens, making for the other side of the bench, said by Hellman to be about a mile across.

Spot snorted. He turned his head aside, peered up at the precipice on the right, where it angled in toward the line of advance of horse and rider, and Anna saw a small animal, somewhat larger than the average house cat, dash from one shadow across an open space, to vanish into another patch of shadow. Another. Still a

third. Odd, too, they seemed, all three, to be moving in the same direction as herself.

The shadows grew longer among the aspens.

Now and then Spot slipped aside, and away from some hidden place whence immediately afterward there came invariably the metallic hum of a rattler.

"Guess," said Anna to herself uncertainly, "that I was a little foolish to do this! My impulses will get me into trouble yet."

But Anna was stubborn. Having started, she had no intention of turning back until she had reached the cul-de-sac about which Hellman had told her.

She reached the side of the bench, and was in a constricted isolated world that must have remained like this, unchanged, changeless, since the Creator had left it; and when she stopped, and there was no sounds save her breathing and the breathing of Spot, who snorted at intervals, and looked nervously to right and left, once turning clear around, as though nervous because he knew things he could not tell the girl, the silence descended like a smothering blanket as large as the universe.

Anna shouted, just to kill the silence:

"Hey!"

And from three directions as many different people, each aping her voice, called out the word:

"Hey! . . . Hey! . . . Hey!"

Cold chills coursed up and down the spine of Anna Sweet.

Then she smiled, though her smile was tremulous. The walls of the bench had hurled her own word back at her, a triple echo that kept repeating itself until it died away entirely—and Anna was afraid to call again.

Just as she turned to retrace her steps, Hellman reached the side of the grove of aspens toward the coulee and, taking his courage in his hands,

had plunged in, and was even now striding toward the spot whence had come her doubtful cry.

But Anna, of course, did not know.

The sun had gone down, and darkness was in possession of the world, before she was halfway back to the precipitous descent. How would she get down? she asked herself. Then she was glad darkness had fallen. She'd shut her eyes and trust Spot.

Spot kept on, moving aside now and again, for a period that to Anna Sweet seemed endless. She rode bent far forward, straining her eyes ahead to pick out clutching limbs of the aspens, so that they might not drag her from the saddle. Unhorsed in this horrible place! Unthinkable!

Spot paused of his own accord, looked right and left, and snorted.

But only silence answered him, silence save for the whispering in the night breeze of the quaking aspens.

Anna was badly frightened now. She couldn't tell which way was which, and even Spot might be lost. This idea almost unseated her reason for a moment. But she was afraid to call again.

Then the delayed expected happened. From off to Anna's left sounded a long-drawn scream, as of a woman in mortal terror! The scream mounted in a caterwauling crescendo of sound, dying off peculiarly, making her think of a baby which has just awakened and cries to be fed.

From three sides other wildcats, or bobcats as coulee folk call them, answered the signalman, and the echoes screamed back and forth through the tangled growth of service-berry and quaking aspens.

SPOT forgot himself for a moment with that first scream. It frightened him. After all, a horse may be only so intelligent, and Spot did not regain his courage until he had made half a dozen wild leaps straight ahead. Then he was riderless. A limb had

caught Anna across the chest and flung her behind the horse. The tangled underbrush broke her fall somewhat, but she had been knocked mercifully unconscious by the force of the blow.

She moaned a trifle and lay still, and Spot, knowing nothing else to do, and being but a horse after all, streaked it through the quaking aspens, snorting in terror, nor stopped until he reached the crest of the precipice, where he paused only long enough to look over and pick out the proper place to descend. A figure had grabbed at him as he ran through the aspens, but in his fear he had refused to obey his master, whose face was as pale as ashes, though it was too dark for any one to see, had there been any observer.

Then Spot was sliding down the talus slope, headed for his stall.

In the house the homesteader and his wife raised their heads to listen.

The latter sighed with relief.

"They're coming back all right," she said, "I'll put the coffee on."

But minutes passed and the door which gave upon the now black coulee remained closed. The homesteader and his wife began to look at each other again, afraid to ask questions which were in the mind of each.

Meanwhile, Anna Sweet stirred, opened her eyes.

Dark as the inside of a pocket. Slithering sounds on the brush on all sides. Near at hand a spitting sound, as of an angry tabby cat giving vent to her displeasure.

Then Anna was standing, quivering in every limb, frightened half out of her wits.

"Anna," she told herself, "Anna! You can't help yourself by getting scared. You're in for it now. Fire will keep snakes and cats away."

But to gather firewood, the dried twigs and leaves under the aspens, meant exposing herself to sure death by snake bite.

Anna solved the problem by kicking about with her booted feet, until she had gathered together a sizable pile, which she kicked against a rotting tree stump.

She had three matches. The flame caught on the first attempt, flared up, much to the delight of Anna, who had bent over quickly, straightened swiftly, in fancy feeling the quick dart of a diamond shaped head from the darkness.

She sat down on the log. She remembered that snakes sometimes make their home in hollow logs, so she stood up again, swiftly glancing around her in terror.

At the edge of the firelight she saw a boulder she could manage.

She rolled it to the fire and sat down. She tried to whistle. It was a dreary failure.

She stared into the darkness. It was empty of all save darkness.

But stay!

Two tiny balls of flame, which moved questioningly from right to left, from left to right, back and forth—greenish balls of flame which the firelight turned to iridescent jade. Ten feet away. But they came no nearer. Anna screamed, and out of the darkness her scream was hurled defiantly back at her, again and again.

She turned her head. There were two more balls of flame, set close together, a bit further to the right. Still further, two more.

Eyes of the night, two by two, peering at the girl who had been foolish.

She heard the swishing of branches, but could not see the tree that had moved. But she looked in the direction of the sound, and shrank back with a cry of alarm. Two more balls of flame in the tree, larger these two, further apart, not quite so deadly shining, though seeming to be wells of malevolence.

Thank God for fire!

Suppose, Anna thought, she hadn't

regained consciousness just when she did?

And how would she keep the fire going? There were others now, two by two as before, of the larger eyes, further back than the tiny eyes. She dare not allow the fire to die down, dare not leave its comforting light to gather more twigs and leaves.

She screamed again. The wildcats and the echoes of her own voice made answer.

Far off to her left she heard a crashing in the bushes, as of a larger animal. The sound was approaching. Did all wild animals, she wondered, fear the fire?

Then silence. Now and then slithering sounds only, and always the eyes.

Then a long period of silence. Anna thought she heard a gliding sound behind her; but she was afraid to turn around, so she shifted her seat, tried to fool herself by pretending she hadn't heard it.

It came again.

Then all other sounds were drowned out as the pocket in the precipice echoed and reechoed to the crashing of a revolver, three shots fired in rapid succession.

Anna screamed and fainted.

She fell within a foot of a reptile, a huge one, entirely harmless because his head was smashed until only the twenty odd castanets on his tail told the class to which he belonged. A huge creature known to science as *crotalus cerastes*.

INTO the circle of firelight strode a man whose face was bleeding from his tussles with the underbrush. Unnatural it looked, because it was deathly pale beneath the blood.

It was Hellman. He was trembling as though with the ague, as he gathered the girl in his arms.

She was a hardy little lady.

Her faint did not last long.

She awoke to find Hellman, his own man again now that he had won her,

shaking her as though she had been a child. He was almost sobbing. A terrible ordeal, even for a man, unbelievable for a girl.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I was a little fool! You ought to wallop me good!"

"I reckon," said Hellman quietly, "that a walloping is what yon need! And remember, this hurts me worse than it does you!"

Methodically, as though spanking young ladies had hitherto been his daily duty, Hellman turned Anna Sweet across his knees and spanked her. When he finished he righted her on his knees, drew her face to his and kissed her roundly, again and again.

"You need handling," he said.

Anna slapped his face, one two-ed him with right and left, rocking his head from side to side, until his pale cheeks were angry red.

And Hellman kissed her again.

"Stop that, you cur!"

The second man who came in was Williams. One minute and there were just Anna and Hellman. Then there was Williams, miraculously materialized out of the darkness.

He struck Hellman a savage blow on the side on the head, toppling him over. Anna fell from him, got to her feet unsteadily, and as the two men mixed it. Hellman getting to his feet and coming in with both arms flailing, she stole a look into the shadows.

The eyes of the night had vanished.

Hellman and Williams, forgetting the girl, had turned brute for the time, fighting there in the firelight, battering each other with great stabbing blows, slashing, never guarding, until crimson stains, fresh stains, appeared on the face of each.

When Sweet, staggering, his eyes wide with terror, came into the circle, neither man seemed to see him. They fought on, cursing each other, pounding each other down with bitter, savage blows.

Sweet tried to stop them, and was

almost hurled into the fire by the outflung arm of Williams.

"Damn you!" muttered Williams. "What did you mean spanking that Anna girl? She's not a horse to be punished!"

"No, but she needed spanking! What business is it of yours, anyway?"

"I love her."

"So do I, and she needs handling!"

"Give it to him, Mr. Williams," cried Anna, and her words were trembling with sobs. "He isn't even an imitation gentleman!"

Hellman crashed to the ground. His head struck the boulder upon which Anna had been sitting, where she had been sitting when Hellman had shot the great snake which still writhed at the edge of the firelight.

Williams looked down at Hellman. Hellman did not move. Williams hesitated. Then he brought some limbs, built up the fire.

"He's a good woodsman," he explained to Anna, "the fire'll keep the snakes away, and when he comes around he can get out all right. Your dad an' me'll have to carry you. Can't have you bitten."

Anna looked at Hellman with a shudder of distaste.

When her father and Williams made a chair for her with their shoulders and arms, she did not demur. Strongly, brave because no longer alone, the three quitted the circle of firelight, headed westward into the tangle of service-berry and quaking aspens.

Anna twisted slightly to look back. Back there, alone again, unconscious, stared at by the eyes, two by two always, of the night, was Hellman, the man who had reached her first, who perhaps had been the first to come seeking her.

WITH a cry of anguish, and before either her dad or Williams could divine her intentions, Anna had dropped from their shoulders, turned, thrust them aside, and was running back, unafraid now of the night, and of lurking things in the underbrush.

The two men turned, began swift pursuit of Anna, whom they could see, a slender figure, against the faint glow of the distant fire. They stepped high, wide, and handsome as they ran, leaping imaginary snakes, making speed, lifting their feet swiftly lest they hesitate too long and be bitten.

When they reached the fire they saw a strange sight.

Anna Sweet, sitting flat on the ground, forgetful of snakes, holding Hellman's head in her arms, striving to wipe the blood from his face with a tiny handkerchief.

"Steven!" she was calling. "Steve! I didn't mean a word of it! I needed spanking! Wake up! Open your eyes! You can spank me again if you like! Steven! Steve!"

And when Hellman, opening his eyes, to see the eyes of Anna Sweet, tear-stained, looking into his own, put his trembling arms around her, both Sweet and Williams were doubly sure there was no accounting for the tastes of women.

"Oh, well," said Williams philosophically, "I'm glad, for my part, I ain't in Steve's shoes! Some day, maybe, after he's been married to your daughter long enough to get used to havin' her around, so that he'll miss her if he loses her, some other guy will come along who spansk harder than Steve does! Then where'll Steve be?"

"I'll be there," said Steve himself, grinning at his erstwhile partner, "to show the highbinder that spankin' ain't no way to handle a lady! Look how close I come to lose'n her!"

"You never," put in Anna, "had a chance to lose me!"

Greaser Gold

A Three-Part Story of Borderland Revolution

By EVAN J. DAVID

PART TWO

Gun-play with dramatic action aplenty marks the development of this revolutionary bandit story

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE:

General Pedro Cabanez, Mexican rebel and bandit, having raided the Sonora Gold Mine of Waldren Gordan, compels the Mexican employees to join his rebel forces and holds Melville Anderson, the chief engineer, and his assistant, prisoners for \$100,000 ransom . . . The rebels' demands are received at the Gordon Arizona ranch, during the mine-owner's absence and his daughter Anita, who is in love with Anderson, raises part of the money and flies to the rescue . . . Her airplane is shot down by the rebels as she reaches the gold-mine and, she also is taken prisoner . . . Whilst awaiting further news from Anita's father; Anderson conceives a desperate plan of kidnaping the entire rebel force and turning them over to the Mexican Federals who are in camp some miles from the mine. As the preceding chapters close his project has been launched but, as the following chapters show, has only brought about further trials and dangers for the prisoners.

CHAPTER VIII

THE fortunes of war had made it necessary for them to set off across the burning desert in the blazing sun of high noon. There was no time to be lost in getting to Aguila. Nor could they take the regular trail by way of the Wells, for fear of meeting with the men General Cabanez had left there to wait for the Americans with the ransom.

They would have to make a detour around that oasis in the desert.

Mel's plan was to strike out west of the trail and try to get by the Wells at a distance of at least a dozen miles to make sure his party could not be seen by any of the rebels using the trail. It was not going to be easy for the horses making across the desert without a trail. They had no water for the horses, and only a day's supply for the large troop of men. They would have to travel ten extra miles or more to get to Aguila.

Worst of all, Mel now had to take the lead to make the trail. Anita had to take up the rear with Hatfield, whose shoulder made riding very hard for him. Mel knew he would not be able to shoot very long with a repeating rifle. It was certainly a hazardous and daring chance these three Americans were taking. But necessity knows no restraints.

In and out among the cactus, the sage bush, the mounds of smooth soft sand, often drifted into high heaps, the caravan made its way. The red hot sun made men and beasts perspire until they were wringing wet. The roofs of their mouths got dry and thick.

They had not gone more than five

miles when one of the Mexican soldiers was overcome by the heat and fell off his horse. At the command of Hatfield, three rebels jumped down, bathed him with water from a gourd. The water was as hot as the scorching air. The poor fellow was so overcome that he died within a few minutes. There was no time to stop to bury him deep. Mel had his comrades pile some sand over him and leave him there in the desert.

That event disconcerted the Mexicans. Used as they were to all kinds of hardships, and to taking them stolidly, they had not complained until now. All at once they all became very audible in their complaints about the heat.

"Por Dios! All our drinking water will be only a thimbleful poured on the desert! Do you want to kill my men, who are fighting for the liberation of Mexico?" roared Cabanez.

Mel rode up beside the bandit leader. "Tell your men to keep quiet or I'll dismount them and leave them to die in the desert."

"Why should I give your orders?" asked Cabanez.

"Purely for humanitarian reasons."

"Humanitarian reasons, bah! Do you call it humanitarian to make men ride out through this burning desert without enough water to moisten our throats? Is that the humane way the Americans carry on war?"

"Every man who does not stop complaining, will be dismounted and left to die of thirst in the desert," shouted Mel from King's saddle.

All the rebels moaned in unison. "I would just as soon be left in the desert as taken into Aguila," groaned one.

"Yes. There we shall all be shot

by the Federalists for treason," chimed in another.

There was a silence for a minute. Then first one, then two, and finally thirty-nine of the nondescript Mexicans begged to be left alone in the desert to die.

MEL did some quick thinking. He would not dare back down on his threat, or he would have to shoot somebody down in cold blood to again get his discipline. He estimated that they were now some twenty miles away from the hacienda and the foot of the mountains. If he let these men go they would most likely make their way back to the mountains where they would soon be among their friends. Many of these men had worked for his company, and although he did not know them personally, he felt a certain amount of paternal responsibility for them. He did not want them shot by the Federalists. He only wanted to get out of the country with his two friends. He wanted to see Cabanez and Morales pay for their many crimes.

"How many of you men would prefer to take a chance of walking back to the mountains without water or fire-arms, rather than be driven into Aguila?" asked Mel. With the extra water his own party would not suffer much from thirst for the rest of their journey into Aguila. Besides most of the horses would, without burdens, be in fairly good condition when they got there.

At once the men began to call out that they would be glad to take a chance on walking back to the mountains. When Mel got through counting them, he found that every man wanted to take his chances in that way.

"All right, you may all go, except you, Cabanez, Morales, Captain Xenia, Lt. Doria, and these two privates." Mel pointed to the man who

had shot at him from the tower wall and Tony Castro the sentinel that had paced back and forth before his door at the hacienda. Naturally those two Mexicans made a loud protest, which Hatfield silenced by threatening to shoot them on the spot.

"These Americanos are always talking about how humane they are. Oh! Yes, they are just as humane as we are. Bah!" cried Cabanez.

Morales grew profane. "I curse every Gringo pig I ever met. I told you not once, but a half a dozen times to shoot him and that other Gringo, and take the girl into the mountains. She was worth more than the ransom—big as you made it. But you wouldn't listen to me, and now see what a mess you have got us all into. A fine leader you are!"

"Quiet there!" shouted Hatfield, turning in his saddle.

Meanwhile Mel was being besieged by Captain Xenia and Lt. Doria. "Let us go back too. We have done you no harm. You ought to let us go."

Mel's threats to execute them then and there made them frightened and sullen. The two privates obeyed Mel's orders to string and lead the horses out behind Anita, who was now again to take the lead. Mel rode beside the long string of animals and gave her directions.

It did not take long to dismount the rest of the troop and send them back along the trail out of hearing. Then the long caravan again set out through the blazing sunlight towards Aguila and safety.

For fully an hour, by turning in his saddle, Mel could see the black thread of men in Indian file drawing back across the golden desert, towards the blue line of the distant mountains far to the south. Then they were finally lost to view among the sand mounds.

On and on, Mel's long caravan of horses trudged until their heads almost touched the undulating sand. The moon was late coming up. As there was no trail to follow, Mel ordered a rest until the moon came up.

They built a fire to give them light and to drive away the lizards from the blanket that Anita spread out on the sands as a tablecloth. They all ate together, Morales and the other three Mexicans in silence. But Cabanez kept up a constant banter, using Mel as the butt of his sarcasm and his crude jokes. He was excessively polite to Anita. He wanted to wait upon her all the time, but she would not let him do a thing for her. It was evident in her beautiful face that she loathed him more than the lizards of the desert.

"Senor Anderson is very considerate. He prefers to make us ride through the desert and die of thirst, rather than stand us up against a wall in Aguila—or do that merciful service for us out here on the plains. Colonel Morales, don't you think he is very considerate of us? Bah!" He lighted another match and puffed on his cigarette. "Senor Mel is afraid to kill us. He does not want our blood on his lily-white hands. He wants to take us where the Federalists will do it for him. I would rather die now, than suffer any more from this riding and heat. Wouldn't you, Morales?"

The man with the big jaw only grunted.

"General Cabanez, I'm sorry to inform you that unless you close your mouth and keep it closed, I'll have to gag you," replied Mel. "If you are so anxious to die, only remember that Mr. Hatfield is very anxious to do for you what you did for him out on the desert."

"I only wish he would. I'd will-

ingly take the same chance I gave him."

"The peon you murdered in my patio worked for me ever since he was a boy, General Cabanez. I must make you pay with your life for his," replied Melville quietly. He munched on the frijoles and hot biscuits the Mexican sentinel had made.

Mel raised a cup of coffee to his lips, when a report of a rifle cracked the starry darkness of the night. The coffee was knocked into Anderson's face. For a second he sat staring at the remains of the liquid pouring out of a hole in the tin. The bullet had come that close to his face.

CHAPTER IX

MEL'S first thought was that the sentinel, whom he had shot on the tower gate, had captured one of the rifles, and had taken a pot shot at him. He fell on his belly, and scooped so much sand onto the fire that it was swamped at once. Darkness swallowed up the desert. The dark starry sky arched above them.

"Move your position, Anita," whispered Mel.

"I have. Were you hurt?" she asked in an anxious voice.

"No, but it was a close call. You Mexicans lie down in that hole behind that cactus," Mel ordered the four prisoners at hand. Two were out watching the hobbled horses.

"Now we are in a nice mess," snarled Cabanez.

"Silence, or I'll kill you," commanded Anderson. "Anita, you watch these four men. The first one that moves, fill him full of lead from your repeating rifle."

"All right," answered the girl. She lay stretched out on the side of the deep bowl, where the fire had been.

"Crack!" It was Hatfield's rifle

firing a single shot. "Did you get him?" asked Mel.

"No, damn them. It was too dark to see more than the outline of his head and shoulders above the skyline. They are stalking us."

"Keep a sharp look-out! I'm going to crawl out and protect the hobbled horses."

"Oh! Don't go and leave us," cried Anita. "If we must die, let us die together."

"We are not going to die, any of us. I'll be back in a few seconds."

Mel started to wriggle around the cactus towards the dark outlines of the restless animals, some of whom were grunting for food and water.

"There they go!" cried Hatfield.

"Too late! They are leading them off!" moaned Mel. He saw the forms of the animals stampeding against the bright stars of the velvet sky. With the animals gone they would be at the mercy of the attacking party.

Mel stood right up, and ran as hard as his legs could carry him to head the animals off. They were being headed for a bunch of sage bush on the black horizon.

"Crack! Crack! Crack!" came a series of bullets. Mel threw himself forward. A dozen shots rang out over his prostrate body. He had been seen. It was useless to go on.

With the horses gone, Mel's party would be unable to move out of that depression in the desert. Before the sun was very high the next morning, they would die of thirst or surrender to the besieging party. There was no possibility now of relief from the Federalists in Aguila. Nor was there any hope even if Anita's father and Chesty flew down to the Wells, that they would find Mel's party there, ten miles off the trail in the heart of the desert.

But this was no time to lament the past. He must act. He crawled back to the hole in the desert.

The four men lay side by side at the bottom of the hole, safely out of range of any shots. Anita was sitting well above them.

"Be sure to not get any higher," cautioned Mel.

"Don't fear, I won't. Only be care of yourself, dear. You are so brave and reckless. If anything happened to you—" she broke off and shuddered.

"You mustn't be frightened, Anita. Bad as he is, I don't think Cabanez would ruin your life by forcing you to marry him. Anyhow we will get out of this some way," he replied encouragingly. If only he had felt as hopeful as he sounded!

"Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!" Hatfield's rifle had barked four times.

"Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat!" came the machine gun fire of the Mexicans out in the plains. "Whiz-z-z-! Zip! Zip! Zip!" The bullets ploughed through the stiff paper-like leaves of the cactus plants on the edge of the depression. Fragments of the giant plants fell on the men at the bottom of the hole.

"**C**ARAMBA!" cursed Morales. "The fools may shoot us yet! Don't they know all they have to do is besiege this hole till the Gringo pig surrenders?"

"Be quiet!" whispered Anita. "Put that match back!"

"Si, si," answered Cabanez, obeying.

Lying on the edge of the crater, Mel saw a sombrero silhouetted against the stars on the right side of the low sage bush. His repeating rifle fired three shots. Somebody out on the desert gave a shriek. He saw two forms rise from behind a solitary cactus plant, not more than a dozen yards away.

They dropped out of sight just as he fired again. They had been crawling up under cover of the

machine gun with the idea of rushing the hole as soon as the fire lifted. It was an old World War trick. Why didn't the fools wait until morning? Time was on their side. Or was it? Perhaps there was a reason why they were rushing the fight. Perhaps they expected to be attacked themselves in the morning.

The crack of Hatfield's rifle sounded again. A terrible shriek followed. Then a fusillade of bullets began to zip and zip where the flash of Hatfield's rifle had spurted into the night. Bullets came so low now that neither American dared to lift his head.

Mel laid back behind the sheltering sand and waited for the firing to cease. In a minute the machine gun stopped zipping. The Mexicans were saving their ammunition.

"Surrender, Gringo pigs, and we will cease firing!" came a voice from the sage bush under the northern star.

"Why are you firing at us?" shouted Mel.

"You have our officers prisoners," replied the voice. "If you surrender them to us we will let you go."

"What guarantee have we that you will let us go?"

"The word of a gentleman and officer of the Mexican Army of Liberation."

Mel knew how desperate their situation was. Now that the horses had been captured his party was without water or provisions. When the sun rose their tortures would begin. Their tongues would hang out. Their lips would swell. Their throats would close up. Trudging on foot, they would soon succumb to the heat of the sun and the burning desert. Hatfield was wounded. Anita Gordon was not used to such exposures and physical effort. But he had no faith in the word of these "officers and gentlemen." He must try his last card!

"If you do not withdraw, and cease firing, we will expose your officers to your fire."

A derisive laugh came back to them through the starry night. "It is to laugh! You two Gringo pigs know what will happen to you if you do anything like that—and the Americano lady too."

The laughter rose from a ring completely around the hollow. Most of the men Mel had liberated must be in that crowd. They were armed with rifles they had captured from the packs of those three horses. With the daylight, they could plant sharpshooters on the more distant mounds and pick off Hatfield and himself at leisure. Then Anita would be left defenseless.

"What do you think, Hatfield?" Shall we surrender and take our chances on thus saving Anita's life?" asked Mel.

"We will have to give up sooner or later," replied the wounded man. "In my condition I can't plod very far through the sun across this desert. Let us bargain for the life of the girl."

"Don't surrender on my account," cried Anita. "I'll stick it as long as you do."

"It is useless waiting until we are nearly dead." Mel lifted his voice. "We'll surrender if you give us your word that you will observe all the rules of war and protect our lives and the honor of Senorita Gordon."

"Oh, I'm afraid that you are doing this just for me," wailed Anita.

"Many of us have worked for you and your company," came the Mexican voice across the desert. "We give our word as gentlemen and officers to see that you are treated as prisoners of war."

"We surrender. Send forward a man with a flag of truce," cried Melville.

He saw a black figure rise from the sage brush and wave a piece of

cloth. He himself got up and waved the bandana he wore around his neck. More men rose into the dark sky. There was a circle of them clear around the sand pit. They moved cautiously with rifles in their hands, like men going over the top.

"We are surrendering. We are dropping our rifles. You do the same," cried Mel, afraid of what might happen the moment these bandits had them unarmed.

The men in the advancing line dropped their rifles. Mel and Hatfield did the same, and stood up in full sight of the Mexicans on the lip of the depression. The men he had liberated swarmed around him. They took his revolvers. They took the rifle away from Anita.

The prisoners jumped up. Cabanez and Morales shook hands and thanked the officer who had been sent up into the mountains for the priest. The other two prisoners rushed out to the water gourds. Anita began to weep softly on Mel's shoulder. She had been a very brave girl until this moment. But she was worn out by the long journey, the excitement, and this new turning of the tables.

Someone lighted the fire. A dozen lanterns were moving about. They cast grotesque shadows of armed Mexicans, in sombreros and baggy trousers, with heavy belts of cartridges. Peons laughed and cursed. Some of the bandits who had come down from the mountains were staring at the three Americans with unmitigated curiosity.

A heated argument rose among the group of Mexican officers. By the incessant glowing of two cigarettes, Mel could see the mouths of Morales and Cabanez.

"I tell you I will not have those Americans shot," Cabanez was saying. "They are worth just as much alive as they were before. We shall

take them back to the hacienda. If the ransom comes through we can take the money and give the men over. The girl I really intend to marry."

"She'll never marry you. She'll kill herself first—and maybe you too!" cried Morales. "I've told you time and again that you were always too soft hearted really when it comes to women. You boasted about the rough way you treat them but—"

"Morales, I am still commander-in-chief of this army," interrupted Cabanez. "While I am, you take orders from me."

There was a tense moment. In the dark Mel could see the two lighted cigarette butts facing each other. Then Cabanez turned his back on the second-in-command.

Morales took a single step forward. A red dagger of light shot out from his hip straight at Cabanez's back. The lighted cigarette dropped to the sand. The bulky figure of the general swayed and collapsed.

Above him stood Morales, swinging revolvers around the crowd of cursing, gesticulating Mexicans.

"All you who have not pledged your word to support me, throw up your hands! I know who you are!" shouted Morales.

The black outline of many hands and arms were raised in the first dim rays of the dawning moonlight across the plains. In the hands of other Mexicans he saw revolvers pointing at those who would not throw their hands up. The mutiny, long planned by Morales, had come to pass. Mel's heart sank. He knew that now he would have to deal with a man much harder than that still figure on the sand.

"Give back their weapons to all who swear to regard me as their leader now. The soft Cabanez is dead!" cried Morales.

One after another, the Mexicans were swearing allegiance to the new chief.

Anita threw her arms around Mel's neck, and whispered, "Oh, Mel! When he comes to take me, kill me. I'd rather die."

CHAPTER X

COL. MORALES walked over to where Mel, the trembling girl, and Hatfield stood waiting their fate. Mel expected to be shot down in cold blood, the way Cabanez was. Mason Hatfield would be shot too, and Morales would then carry Anita off with him—unless the poor girl succeeded in killing herself before then.

Morales drew his gun. Anita threw herself between him and Melville. "Kill me too, if you are going to kill him," she sobbed, clinging to Mel. Hatfield stood with his injured shoulder, as straight as the well one, also waiting for the gun to be turned on him. By the flickering light of the camp fire, Anderson could see the gleam of triumph on Morales' thick lips. He knew it would be no use to mention the rules of war to this bandit. He only hoped Morales would not torture them.

"Don't be afraid—just yet, Senorita," began the new leader, bowing military fashion from the hips. "That dog, Cabanez, spoke the truth. These two Gringo pigs are worth nothing dead. They may be worth something if I get them back to the hacienda and trade them for the ransom. Besides you are now going to be my bride, and you like them, why should I injure them—if it does not please you? Come, Senorita, let us be friends. I will not for the world injure a hair of your glorious head. Don't think for a moment that I am a coarse peon like that dead fool. My father and mother

were Castilian Spanish. My ancestors made history in Spain and Mexico. I am a gentleman born. I am a patriot. Every cent I get from the ransom will go to the cause of the liberation of Mexico. If you, fair lady, will believe in me, some day you may be the wife of the president of Mexico. Such things have happened in Mexico, not once but many times. It will happen again, unless I am killed off. If I am, you will be free to go back to your own country, and marry this fool Gringo. But if you are willing to accept those conditions I will not shoot the two Gringos down as I did that traitor."

He stood pointing the gun at the two men, and waiting for the girl to decide.

"Oh! What shall I do?" wailed the girl in despair.

"I am ready to die," said Mel. "Don't let pity for me influence your decision."

"Me too," said Hatfield, taking a cigarette out of his riding breeches with his good hand.

Anita drew away from Mel, and lifted her head. "I have made up my mind. If you will save the lives of these two men, and send them back to the United States, I will marry you."

"Anita," groaned Mel. "We can't let you do such a thing. And you, Morales. I warn you if you take this girl, I will come back to Mexico, and follow you to the ends of the earth if it be necessary—and kill you."

"Hush, Mel. I love you more than anybody or anything else in the world. If this is the only way I can save you, I'm going to do it, and you cannot stop me. Is it a bargain, Col. Morales?"

"I'm sorry, Senorita, but I cannot promise to send these men back except in payment for some ransom. If it was only I who was to be considered I would willingly send them

back without a cent's ransom. But the cause of Mexican liberty can only be secured by making the Gringos, who took our wealth out of the ground help us by paying it back again."

In the faint moonlight which was now flooding the desert, Melville could see the sardonic smile that moved under the black mustache. He knew this man for a much worse villain than Cabanez.

"Oh don't believe a word he says, Anita! He is fighting for himself, and what he can get out of the Cause."

"Senor Melville Anderson is a very brave man as well as a foolish one, to insult a Mexican gentleman before a lady he loves."

"Those who are about to die, Morales, need fear nothing. I don't just know how you will do it. Perhaps it will be the 'Ley de fuga'—by having somebody tell us to try and escape, for all is set for us to get away. That is an old trick, known not only to you but to your ancestors. However you do it you mean to kill both Hatfield and me—and make this young lady believe you didn't."

"You are mistaken, Senor Mel. I can abide what history will have to say about my actions and motives when I am president of Mexico."

It was Hatfield's turn to laugh derisively. "Did you ever hear such a grand-stand play? Anita, whatever you do don't believe a word of that oily tongued murderer. You just saw him shoot his commanding officer down in cold blood. Your life will be a living hell if you ever marry that outlaw, bandit, and murderer."

"Shut up, both of you, or I'll drill you here and now." Morales stuck out his big jaw, his six-gun again in his hand.

"Put up your gun, Col. Morales," said Anita quietly. "I'll go through

with the ceremony the day you turn them over for ransom."

"It is a bargain. The word of a Spanish gentleman will be kept." Morales reached for her hand.

She put both hands behind her and retreated toward Mel. "You must not touch me until the bargain is complete!"

"As you say." Morales shoved the gun into his holster and turned to give commands to his men. "Mount your horses! Back to the hacienda!"

CHAPTER XI

THEY rode back to the hacienda through the moonlight. The air was very still. Only heat waves moved over the scorched desert. With plenty of water to drink, and an occasional breath of wind coming down from the high mountains, they managed to sit their horses without falling off. But after all they had suffered during the day, the ride was agonizing, especially for Anita.

The caravan moved back over the trail in single file, the poor horses holding their heads lower than ever, and just able to lift one hoof after another.

Morales allowed the three Americans to ride together. He had not asked for their parole. Instead he established a guard of two Mexicans with repeating rifles directly in front of them and another two just behind them.

Mel thought of a thousand and one things that he would like to do. But the odds were so great against him that unless some unexpected opportunity occurred, there would be little chance of saving Anita from her terrible fate.

"What a wonderful moon! How large and clear cut the edges look!" murmured Anita.

"Yes. Out here in this dry, clear air, the moon and the stars appear

to be twice their normal size." Mel knew she was trying to get her mind off their predicament. He admired her courage and pluck.

It was a relief to Mel, when he saw the black walls of the hacienda rise at the foot of the mountains, which were bathed in amber moonlight. The moon was so low in the West that he could not at first see if the great gate was open. He hoped that the men sent for the Priest had not been able to bring him down. He wondered what had become of José.

Soon they were within the sound of falling water in the patio. The men were dismounting. They had a hard time keeping the horses from drinking in their overheated condition.

Morales advanced to the three Americans just as Mel lifted Anita down. "I'm sorry I shall have to separate you. You may go to the room you occupied before, Senorita. I sent a rider ahead to see that it was all fixed up for you. It awaits." Again he made that exaggerated bow.

"What are you going to do with these gentlemen?" she asked in a cold, metallic voice.

"Oh, they shall be well taken care of!"

"But I refuse to go on with my bargain unless I know. You know there is always an escape through death."

"I have given you my word of honor there will be no need for that," he replied. "Of course, I cannot take the chances with these gentlemen, than Cabanez did."

"But what are you going to do with them?" she insisted.

"I know it is useless to ask them to give me their word of honor not to try to escape. Therefore they cannot be released on parole. I shall not be able to let them stay in the rooms they did before, because they may try to escape. The necessity of

war and the cause of the Liberation of Mexico, makes it imperative that I hold them prisoners in the dungeon of the hacienda. But I give you my word, I have had it too fixed up, so that they can live in it. More I cannot do."

"Oh, I think that is awful," sobbed the girl again turning towards Mel and burying her face on his breast.

"There, there, Anita," whispered Mel, "our luck will yet change. There is no help for it now. Let us hope that relief will come soon."

"Oh dear, if father and Chesty could only be reached, I'm sure they would find some way of saving us."

"Perhaps they are on their way here now. Keep a stiff upper lip. I still have a card up my sleeve."

Morales signaled to the four armed Mexicans, who walked up to Melville and Hatfield. "Again I beg your pardon, but time is passing. You must do as I say."

"All right," sighed Anita. She stepped up on the porch and disappeared into her room. The Mexicans escorted the two Americans to the narrow stone steps that led down fourteen feet to the cellar under the stables near the rear gate towards the plateau. It was lighted with candles and furnished with two cots, a small table, and some books.

"You go to sleep. I'll stay awake and see what happens. Then you can take the watch, and I'll sleep," said Mel, beginning to bathe Hatfield's wound which was healing up nicely, despite the heat he had been through.

"Either way. I'm all in," replied the foreman. He sank on the cot and was asleep before he could take his high boots off. Mel undressed the man and stretched him out. The heat was terribly oppressive.

SILENCE pervaded the patio. Every man including even the guards must have fallen asleep. Only the neighing and tramping of the horses came to Mel through the adobe walls of the dungeon.

Presently he heard a scratching on the floor. Two candles still burned on the table. He glanced down to see if there were any rats on the mine slag floor. They ought not to be able to get in, since he had used the dungeon as an ice box in the day, when he had plenty of perishable food, and it had been made rat proof.

Then he picked up a candle and looked. There to his amazement was a thin piece of slate no thicker than a boy's school slate. It had been pushed in under the heavy oak door. On it was an unmistakable message written in Spanish. Mel picked it up and read:

"I am Tony, the sentinel you befriended. José has planned an escape for you and the Senorita to the tunnel. He will give me the signal to come down and open the door for you to escape. He, himself, will let the Senorita out. All your old employees are with you, and will fight for you if need be." Mel read and reread the message. So this was the way Morales was going to dispose of him. Apply the famous old Spanish "Ley de Fuga"—The Law of Flight—as it had been practiced by the Spaniards ever since the Middle Ages. Perhaps Mel himself had given him the hint. This scheme would dispose of both Mel and Hatfield. Yes, Morales wanted the girl more than the ransom.

Poor José! Undoubtedly he had been captured when the bandits came down from the mountains so unexpectedly. Most likely they had tortured him until he told how he had communicated with them. Mel would not bother waking up Hatfield to give him that message. The

whole thing was too obvious. Senor Morales would have to find some other way of killing them off, Mel Anderson would not fall into such a trap.

A half hour passed. It was half-past four. Hatfield was dead to the world. Mel himself could hardly keep awake.

Again there was scratching at the door. Mel shook Hatfield and helped him dress. By the time he had him awake the big oak door was swinging quietly open.

With his heart in his throat Mel watched. Perhaps they were going to be shot down in cold blood right there in that dungeon.

The handles of two 45's were shoved in. With a bound like a panther, Mel grabbed them. He noticed the lead sticking out of the drum. They were loaded!

Another two revolvers were thrust in the door from the dark. Hatfield grabbed them quickly as Mel had a minute before. He showed the lead to Anderson. Then the door swung open. There was nobody there!

"I think this is a *Ley de Fuga*," whispered Mel. "But I would rather die trying to escape than be shot down here in cold blood. Maybe we can make it if José is alive."

"I'll risk it if you will," replied Hatfield. "It won't be so bad to die with a six-gun in your hand, and your boots on."

"Let's go, you loyal, old son-of-a-gun," whispered Mel affectionately.

Like a pair of cats they were up the narrow circular stone stairs of the dungeon. Nobody fired at them from behind. Nobody seemed to interfere with them.

At the top was another door, wide open. Where was the jailer? Absolute darkness reigned out in the patio, for the full moon had gone down behind the western mountains. No sound but the stamping of

the horses, and the dripping of the fountain in the stillness, the strong scent of the stables and now and then a whiff of tropical flowers. An open door! It might mean sure death for them to pass through!

They could see the outline of the sentinel on the platform above the gate. He was looking over the plain.

"Shall we go ahead?" whispered Mel.

"Sure, I'm aching to bump off a couple of those murderers before they get me," the foreman whispered back.

"Let's sneak to Anita's room, and see if we can awaken her without arousing the others."

"All right."

Mel started forward. His foot hit something soft. He nearly fell. It was a man lying across the threshold. He groaned. Mel bent and turned him over. He was either dead drunk, or wounded.

They passed on sliding from pillar to pillar, on the long porch, towards the long French windows that looked into the rooms.

Suddenly a terrible shriek arose from the room that Mel had occupied. "Rattle-snakes! Rattle-snakes! Again por Dios! Bring a light! I'm bitten! I'm bitten!"

It was the voice of Morales.

"Thank God! José is still alive!" whispered Mel. He sank down beside a heap of sweat stinking saddles piled on the porch.

Men began running across the patio. The guard from the tower was the first one down to the window, but the two Indians that Morales had ordered to sleep on his threshold were already in the room.

Resounding whacks echoed and reechoed through the stone walls. All the soldiers in the patio were running hither and yon, shouting, cursing, wailing. But most vocifer-

ous of all was the voice of Morales, shouting to the peons to suck the poison out of three bites, he was suffering from.

"Now is the time to get Anita and make for the tunnel. That message must have been the truth after all," whispered Melville.

"Yes. This is our chance," agreed Hatfield. "Up boys, and at them!"

With the speed of a charging lion, Mel had crossed the length of that porch, past the long windows where all the men were rushing in and about. But before he reached Anita's window, he saw it open. A man stepped out, and looked about. Mel stopped in his tracks and raised his gun. Then he suddenly lowered it. He had recognized the muscular figure of José in his dirty white linen.

The peon gave a sign of recognition, and pulled Anita out through the long French window.

"Make a passage for us to the rear portero," said José in a voice just loud enough for Mel to hear above the confusion nearby.

"No. Hatfield will do that. I'll bring up the rear." Mel assumed the leadership. He turned to look for his foreman.

He was just in time to see the little man knock down two Mexicans with the butt of his revolver. Then another raised the stock of his rifle to brain Hatfield. There was nothing for Mel to do but to shoot the rebel down.

His gun cracked. The Mexican dropped the rifle and collapsed. The shot awoke a thousand echoes in the court-yard. They were followed by as many wild yells.

"The Americanos are attacking us!"

"The hacienda is surrounded!"

"There are hundreds of Gringos in the patio."

"Shall we surrender?"

THE voices of peons came from different quarters of the patio. Mel realized that the men he had treated so kindly when they worked for him, were now saying these things to help him get away. The message on the slate had been the truth after all!

"Quick, Hat! Lead the way to the tunnel."

"I heard you the first time, Mel," shouted the foreman. He fired twice in rapid succession at the window back of Mel. Mel looked around just in time to see rifles clattering down on the porch. Two bodies pitched out of the window.

With the butt of his gun, Mel had to smash the heads of two Mexicans, who had stepped with drawn knives between him and the fountain. They had evidently run from the barn at the first call of their general with no rifles or small arms.

Somebody fired behind Mel. He felt a hot flash on his cheek. It was from the gun of Morales, who had rushed out holding his bleeding left hand high in the air. He must have slashed it himself, where one of the snakes had got him.

Mel fired point blank. Some peon threw himself between Mel and the rebel leaded. The man died at once.

Mel felt a staggering blow from a fist on his cheek. He went down on his knees. Somebody, with a mighty pull, lifted him up and into the yard.

Both Mel's guns were now blazing right and left. He retreated after Anita, towards the fountain and the rear gate. Groans, curses, warnings, commands, all commingled in that terrible darkness.

Mel's guns were empty. Between him and the candle light in the window, a man was firing at him from behind a pillar. Mel threw the empty guns at him.

He felt a shock from above. He ran his hand through his thick Auburn hair. There was blood on his

hand. Then the man behind the post crumpled up. Somebody was shooting for him behind the fountain.

Mel ran around the fountain. He recognized Tony Castro the sentinel who had written the note.

"Run for the tunnel!" Mel commanded. "Give me the rifle and a clip."

The sentinel thrust the gun and two clips of cartridges into Mel's hands, but picked up another rifle from the ground. He had evidently been there all the time, covering Mel's retreat with at least two rifles.

They both opened fire now. But the Mexicans had all taken cover including Morales.

"Let's run for it," shouted Mel. "I don't want to use up all this ammunition before I get out of the patio."

"No, I must stay here. Perhaps I can help more." The peon rushed towards the barn.

Mel dashed towards the big gate. Here a hand to hand battle was on, between José and Hatfield on the one side, and a half a dozen Mexicans, who were blocking the way to the gate. Mel guessed that his ammunition was all gone. He fired one shot from the last clip. The man trying to pull Anita towards the stable door fell.

A moment later, Anita crumpled and fell. A stool had been hurled down on her from the open door of the hay loft. Mel fired before the assailant could get his head back. The man fell dead in the yard.

Mel dropped his rifle and seized Anita. Carrying her over his shoulder, fireman fashion, he started for the great gate. José was opening it.

Hatfield was laughing, as he fought with his bare fists against a big Mexican, who was also unarmed. His wounded friend was no match for this man. Mel struck the Mexican with his free hand on the

point of the jaw. Then he stepped over his body and ran for the plateau.

Dawn was already breaking in the East. It would be impossible for the Mexicans to get ahead of them if they ran over the flat space. "Around the east side!" shouted Mel.

He led the way, with the three Mexicans, José and Hatfield following. The peons were deserting to fight with Mel. But they must have been friends of Cabanez for he did not recognize them.

All of a sudden Hatfield stopped short. "So long, Mel. Tell the wife and kiddies my last words were about them," he gasped. "Good luck to you. You'll"

He never finished. A second bullet cut the words out of his mouth. He fell in his tracks.

Other bullets spatted behind them. There was no time for words. Mel had to go on around the slag heap until he and José and the Mexicans entered the tunnel.

He laid the girl down on some boards.

"We can hold this till help comes. Here are the machine guns!" shouted José.

Mel made no answer. With compressed lips he was pouring water on Anita's head. At least she had not seen the end of his best friend.

CHAPTER XII

ALL through the next day the Rebels kept up an intermittent fire at the mouth of the tunnel. Snipers shot from the walls of the hacienda, the edge of the elevated plateau, and from the mountain rocks.

From the trees near the airshaft, which opened up into the mountain, fully half a mile back from the entrance to the tunnel, they also kept firing. It was impossible for any-

body to sally forth without being shot.

Fortunately Mel had hidden several Lewis machine guns in the tunnel against just such a day, also had stocked it with twenty rifles and plenty of ammunition. He had plenty of candles too. But the Rebels had swept down upon him in their last raid and cleaned out his food. Plenty of water flowed through the mine, but the copper and other ores gave it a bad taste.

Mel knew that the Mexicans could not get down the air shaft without a ladder. He and José had removed the one leading from the surface to the first platform fifty feet below. They would not try and rush the mouth of the tunnel with four armed men lying within the dark. But they could soon starve them out. The three days, since the ransom was to be delivered, were already more than up. What would Anita's father do when he returned to his ranch in Arizona, and found that his daughter and his mine manager had been held for ransom, and the time to redeem them had expired? Anyway, the only thing Mel could do was to sit tight, hold the mine, and hope that some kind of relief would come. How long they could hold out in that damp mine with no food and practically no water, he did not know.

Melville believed that one man could hold the foot of the shaft. So he and José took turns at that. At the mouth of the tunnel, each slept, while Anita watched the two Mexicans, who had deserted Morales because he had shot their leader and left him out on the plains to be food for the vultures. Mel had promised to take them to the States with him when they got out of their present predicament.

Anita was greatly distressed at the death of poor Hatfield. But she was very much encouraged about

her own situation, sure that they could hold out in the mine until her father and Chesty flew to their rescue.

They all slept a great deal during the daylight. But when the dusk came they were fully awake to take care of any attack. During these waiting hours, Anita and Mel had much to talk about. She laid cheerful plans for the future. But Mel wondered how long she would be able to stand the depression of those dark, damp corridors.

THE sun had sunk far behind the western mountains before action began. Morales had a string with white paper attached, dropped down the shaft. Mel was then on guard at the foot of the shaft. The Rebel chief promised to give Mel an escort to get over the Border at once and without waiting for the ransom, if he would surrender Anita to him. The proposal was so ridiculous, it made Mel laugh out loud.

But what he read at the end of that note was not to be laughed at. "If you do not do this within a half hour, I shall blow both ends of the mine down upon you and bury all alive."

That was a terrible threat. Mel knew Morales could do it if he had enough high explosives. There might be captured dynamite on those donkeys Cabanez had sent up into the mountains. Mel knew that Morales could have got it back to carry out this dastardly trick. Of course he would not alarm Anita by telling her the contents of this note. She had once determined to sacrifice herself. He was not going to expose her to such a humiliating possibility again.

When José came to relieve him a little later Mel read the note to him.

"They have some dynamite. I saw them loading the boxes and batteries on the donkeys the day they left

for the mountains. Now much it is I don't know. It will take a lot of dynamite to blow in both ends of this mine."

The words were hardly out of José's mouth when there was a loud detonation in the shaft up near the top, some hundred and fifty feet above. It was followed by a falling of timber and the crash of rocks.

"They've blown down the first platform," whispered José. "Luckily it is too wet to take fire easily."

Anita came running in through the dark to their lighted candle. "What was it? Was anybody hurt?"

"No. They are just trying to cut off our escape through the shaft by blowing down the scaffolding."

Another terrific detonation echoed and reechoed through the black corridors. Splintering planks tumbled on another platform with an equal detonation.

"José, you better go out and tell the Mexicans that everything is all right. They may run in here to see what's up, and leave the tunnel unprotected."

The Indian ran towards the distant spots of light, which marked where the other two Mexicans were. He had not gone more than a few steps before another explosion of dynamite came down the shaft and another platform gave way.

The next two explosions came with hardly a minute between. The enemy were evidently trying to blow all the platforms down at once and start a fire.

Mel held Anita close to him. "Cover your ears," he told her. She did it just as the next explosion came on the last platform.

All the ladders and timbers were in a heap at the foot of the shaft. There were some flashes of fire and considerable smoke. Fortunately, it went up the shaft like a chimney.

But that was not the last explosion. A minute later came one more

terrific than all the others put together. The concussion was so great that the air driven through the narrow tube nearly knocked Mel and Anita over. Mel had neglected to cover his own ears. The shock almost deafened him.

He and Anita moved back further towards the mouth of the tunnel. At that moment came another terrific detonation. Timbers, liners, scantling, rocks, and dirt fell down the shaft, and kept falling. The besiegers had blown down a great mass of rock and stones from near the mouth of the shaft. They were blocking up the mouth of that tunnel through which these four men and a girl breathed. Unless something was done soon, they might be buried alive!

"Let's join the others," said Mel. "There is no danger that they will attack us from this quarter. They have sealed it themselves with rock and debris."

"The air is bad. The smell of that dynamite makes my head ache. Isn't there some other hole up in the mountain, to let the bad air out?"

"There may be. There are several cave-ins in the mountain. José might know just where they are. Let's find him."

AT THAT moment the rat-tat-tat of a machine gun came from the mouth of the tunnel. Mel saw answering jets of fire from one of their own guns.

"Come on Anita. We must hurry. Maybe José needs my help."

By the candle light, he led the girl to the heading near where the firing was. But it had ended with the expenditure of one drum.

"They tried to rush us. But I guess that is enough to keep them off," shouted José.

Mel left Anita and advanced. There was another detonation in the mouth of the tunnel. So Morales

was really going ahead to seal them in alive, as sure as the sun had set! The thought froze Mel's heart.

Again and again, the rebels set dynamite on the mouth of the tunnel. Again and again, rocks, trees, bushes poured like a torrent down over the mouth of the tunnel.

Between detonations, Mel spoke to José. "There is no use in our sitting here helpless. We cannot surrender. That means sure death for us and worse for Anita. But is there any way of escape which these bandits do not know? Isn't these some cave-in that you have timbered when the old mine was being worked?"

"Yes, there are several," began José.

He was interrupted by a terrific shriek from Anita. It echoed and reechoed through those black and damp corridors. "Two men have captured me! They are carrying me off!"

Two repeating rifles began to spit red streaks from the neighborhood of the heading where they had left Anita. Instantly Mel smothered the two candles. The men ducked for cover.

Crack, crack, crack, came the report of a rifle. Bullets sped by Mel and José and sputtered against the ore walls.

"Don't shoot," ordered Mel. "You might hit the girl."

"Yes, shoot all you want to," came a voice out of the darkness. "We'll use her for a shield."

"Anita! Anita!" cried Mel. Audible steps retreated through the darkness towards the foot of the shaft.

"Yes, come and get her if you dare, you Gringo pig!" It was the voice of Morales this time. "She is mine now! Try and get her where I'm taking her! Try and get out of here alive!"

"How in the world did he get in here, José?" asked Mel.

"Must be through one of those cave-ins. He's taking her out the way he came in."

"But I must stop him." Mel started after the footsteps now growing fainter.

"Wait, Senor! There may yet be a way. But it will be sure death for you to follow. He will have snipers covering his retreat from those headings. Wait till they are gone. I will perhaps find another way out."

Another explosion in the mouth of the tunnel was followed by a thick, nauseating smoke.

"At last," cried Mel, "They have succeeded in setting a fire where it will smother us to death!"

"Santa Maria, save us from such a death!" cried Leon, the Mexican deserter.

Of course Colonel Morales' plan to seal the mine shafts is a failure and the concluding chapters to be published in the December GOLDEN WEST explain why.

"THE BOOB BUCKAROO"

Trustful Farley sure was a tophand boob when it came to trusting strangers. But even a big-hearted cowpoke like Farley can reach a limit. He did when two bandits pulled a double-cross and laughed.

"The Boob Buckaroo" by Lawrence A. Keating is one of many features in the December GOLDEN WEST—On sale about November 5th.

The Test of Fire

By HENRY LEVERAGE

"Scarface" puts one over on a killer

OLD MAN JACKSON looked the part of a killer. He was tall, raw-boned, cadaverous, with a gorilla-like stoop to his shoulders and a length of arm that linked him with a primal brute that was one span nearer savagery than civilization.

He had set his trap at Cloud-Cap Inn—a log and bark lodge situated where the western spur of Old Baldy jutted out like a harsh promontory. Old Baldy was a remote and high mountain.

Jackson studied the few guests who came his way with a savage glare, appraised their belongings, had his son cook most of the meals they required, and then sent them to bed with an oath and a candle. The living room of Cloud-Cap Inn contained an enormous fireplace. The guest rooms were upstairs, reached by a notched pole in lieu of a ladder.

A fugitive from San Quentin who had escaped with Big-scar Guffman, disappeared after announcing his intention of hiding at Cloud-Cap Inn. The fugitive, who was a yegg bank-rolled with two thousand dollars, went the way of other of Jackson's guests.

Big-scar climbed the slope of Old Baldy with a desire to find out exactly what happened to Micky Gleason, late of San Quentin. He felt that he would be more than a match for Jackson, whose unsavory reputation was known in the Underworld.

It was a case of a grizzly climbing up to a timber wolf.

Big-scar looked the part of a desert prospector. He wore a money-belt that seemingly bulged with money.

Andrew, Jackson's son, who was given to poaching, sat cleaning his shotgun and toasting his shins before the great fireplace, when his father, followed by Big-scar, came through the leather-hinged door of the Inn. A wink at Andrew from Jackson indicated another "paying guest." Andrew rose, glanced at his father and Big-scar, reached, secured a burning stick and lighted a briar-wood pipe after scooping a few flakes of tobacco from his pocket.

"Getin' cold," he remarked.

Jackson unwound a scarf from his neck, thrashed his arms, pointed toward a chair and invited Big-scar to sit down. The yegg roamed the living-room with his eyes. He crossed one knee over the other and drew forth a five-cent cigar. It was the kind of cigar kept in country grocery stores. He too opened his coat and revealed, so that the innkeeper could see it, a chamois belt such as miners use to carry their wealth.

The yegg's survey of the living room of Cloud-Cap Inn was intended to be disarming. He wondered exactly how Micky Gleason had been bumped off by Jackson. How had the escaped convict's body been disposed of? The fireplace looked like a likely spot. A body could be changed to cinders there.

"This guy," thought Big-scar, "is goin' to bite off more than he ken

chew when he starts on me. In th' meantime I'll see if I ken find a clue to Micky, the best pal a crook ever had."

Jackson misinterpreted Big-Scar's gaze around the living-room. "Lookin' for supper, eh? Wal, there ain't any! This good-fer-nothin' son of mine won't work—he's a poor cook—so I'll rustle around an' scrape up a few scraps. Where you goin' from here, stranger?"

HIS father's question interested Andrew, who removed the pipe from his mouth and regarded the guest.

"I don't exactly know," said the yegg. "There's a trail leadin' up th' road a piece that I might take. It heads toward th' place I wuz born in—an' I'm going home. I've made my pile—an' it's time to settle down."

"A middlin' pile?" queried Jackson.

"Considerable!" admitted Big-scar.

Jackson went toward the door leading into the cook-shack; tins rattled; a sheet-iron stove started roaring; bacon odor floated through the Inn. The yegg pulled the chair nearer Andrew and the fire and watched Jackson's son oiling the shotgun.

"Been huntin'?" queried the yegg.

"Nope," said Andrew. "It's again th' law to do any huntin' in these parts—except wolves an' bears—an' there ain't many of those. I was just fixin' th' gun."

Big-scar pulled out another five-center and lighted it; Jackson appeared with a frying pan; Andrew rose and reached to the shelf over the fireplace, where he stood his shotgun upright. There was a great ledge of rock there, behind which a man could almost hide himself.

The son warmed his back; watched Big-scar eat ravenously, while his father stood by. The scion of the Inn tapped the tobacco from his pipe, crossed the floor and began putting on

heavy boots, a woolen sweater and a coon-skin cap.

"I'm goin' to hike over to Arnold's place," he said. "I won't be back until late. Want anything at th' store?"

Jackson sliced a loaf of bread with a hunting knife, threw the slices toward the yegg and said: "There, gol darn you!" and turned upon his son.

"Bring in some wood before you go!"

Andrew brought in the wood—a heaping stack—which he placed near the fireplace, rubbed his hands a moment, glanced at one corner of the room, then slouched through the door and was gone down the frosty trail that led to Arnold's—seven miles from Cloud-Cap Inn.

Jackson and Big Scar were alone in the tavern. They were not likely to be disturbed; no travelers came to Cloud-Cap Inn late at night.

The yegg, who gave the name of Peterson, smoked another cigar while Jackson gathered the remains of the supper and dumped them in the cook-shack. The old man returned, cut off a chunk of black tobacco, felt the edge of a bright hunting knife, appraised Big-scar's thick neck suggestively, then sat down with his boots extended toward the fireplace.

Champing yellow teeth, crossing his long ankles, twisting once and a while, Jackson drove his guest into a yawn and a suggestion that it was "Near time to go to bed."

"Go to bed, gol darn you! There's a candle! There's th' stairs—that pole. You'll find a blanket on th' end of a cot. You'll need it—long toward mornin'."

Unconsciously Big-scar's glance fixed upon the lean hunting knife in Jackson's hand."

"Any danger ov robbery here?"

"Hell no! Go on to bed!"

The yegg took the candle, moved from the yellow light cast by the leaping flames in the fireplace, and climbed the notched pole. Jackson

slowly turned his bristled chin, eyed the shadows at the top of the pple, heard his guest stumbling over the planks; then, like a sigh, a cot squeaked and the candle-flame was snuffed.

A nipping cold crept through the bark-filled crevices between the logs of Cloud-Cap Inn. Jackson piled more wood on the flames and stirred the ashes with an iron ramrod. Each time he rose from his chair his glance swung toward the notched pole and the opening above that led to the attic bedrooms. He got up finally, listened, heard only the whine of the wind, tested the edge of his knife, and started across the floor. The door leading outside could be barred with a long piece of timber. Jackson took this precaution, inclined his head, waited, and then moved stealthily to the pole. He clamped the knife with his teeth and wound his arms around the improvised ladder. Up he went, notch by notch.

A crunching of frozen gravel outside the Inn caused him to turn his head like a savage wolf. Down he slid, doubled up, eyed the door, heard a shout and then an authoritative knock.

Jackson let his knife slide into a pocket; he opened the door and faced Jim Farr—game warden of Baldy Park.

"HOWDY!" said Farr, stamping in. "Howdy, Jackson!" The game warden puffed a frosted breath through his mittened fingers.

Suddenly his eyes were on Jackson. "Thought I'd drop in. Where's that son of yours?"

Jackson knew the reason for Farr's visit; he was looking for poachers.

"You thought you'd drop in, eh? Well, what d'yu expect to find here?"

Game Warden Farr pulled open his coat, revealing a silver-plated badge on his skin vest, drew a chair close to the fire, leaned forward, toasted his

hands, then, after a second scrutiny of the room, remarked:

"Somebody's been shootin' birds—up th' road a piece."

"'Twasn't my son, Andrew."

Farr was non-committal; he picked up a stick, opened a jack-knife with his teeth, and began whittling. Jackson snarled, dug in his pocket, found a plug of tobacco, and he too began whittling. Both men had lived too long in the west to waste words.

Farr rose from the chair, stood regarding the shotgun that stood on the shelf-wide mantle over the fireplace, pocketed his jack-knife, after snapping it shut, and turned.

"Your boy's goin' to get in trouble sooner or later, Jackson. He's hid them birds—no use to hunt for them. But next time—"

Jackson whetted the hunting knife on the back of his hand; stared at Farr's resolute features, then suggested the door with an impatient jerk of his thumb.

"I'm goin' to bed."

"All right!" said Farr.

A gust of frost came into the Inn when the game warden strode out. Jackson braced his knee against the door, closed it, and started for the attic.

He had no fixed plan concerning his guest. The mention of "considerable money" was a spur that guided his steps. Many times there had been robbery and murder at Cloud-Cap Inn.

The innkeeper did not know that his intended prey was one of the most desperate and resourceful crooks living. He had almost forgotten the bumping-off of Micky Gleason.

Big-scar, while Jackson was being detained by the game warden, had inspected the attic floor. His light was formed by tiny matches cupped in his mammoth palms. A second fireplace, on the upper floor, was almost as large as the one downstairs. The ashes in it were cold. There was an iron

shutter back of it. The yegg fell back on the cot and waited for Jackson.

The innkeeper paused when he reached the notched pole. He eyed the dying fire in the fireplace, heard the whimpering wind and remembered that if Andrew went to Arnold's place—a small settlement in Baldy Park, where his son had a girl—he wouldn't return until long after midnight. It was only ten o'clock by an alarm clock that hung near an elk's head on the cabin wall.

A loud snoring came from above.

Jackson pulled himself through the opening, sat down, removed his boots, pinched each damp stocking, then he drew out the lean hunting-knife and felt the edge with his thumb.

THE yegg was quiet; Jackson got to his feet and noiselessly approached his prey. He leaned over the cot and felt for the money-belt. A man, particularly in the West, always wore his belt when sleeping in strange inns.

It was not in Jackson's mind to pilfer the belt; he wanted to find out how much money his guest possessed. A better idea than robbery at the Inn was the old murderer's plan: he would trail his guest at daybreak, when he took the homeward trail, and knife him then.

Holding the point of the hunting-knife at the yegg's throat, Jackson felt with his free hand and touched the chamois-skin belt.

Big-scar doubled his knees slightly, ready to spring.

"This is a tough old bird," he thought. "I'm knife-shy, meself, an' any guy who uses one ought tu be croaked."

Jackson felt around the yegg's waist. He heard the clink of metal. There was also crinkling paper in that belt.

Lightly opening one flap of the belt he leaned and looked at a number of

doubled bills. His greed overcame his prudence; he pulled down the blanket an inch and looked again. This time the sharp knife-point pricked Big-scar in the neck; the yegg hinged upward with a blood-curdling cry; he kicked out his feet and leaped from the cot.

The swishing knife missed him by inches; Jackson lunged again. He kicked aside the cot and charged over the attic floor. Big-scar pretended to bleat like a lamb and ran in a circle.

There were other rooms in the attic through which both men stumbled. Jackson was on the point of slashing the yegg more times than once. Each time Big Scar escaped death by a clever twist. His coat ripped from his shoulder; one shoe almost tripped him up.

A fleecy bank of clouds swept the sky clear of stars; the attic grew dark—illuminated in one place where the pole ran through the floor. Toward this opening Big-scar stumbled; dived along the rough planks, grasped the pole, and disappeared from Jackson's sight—like a grizzly falling from a precipice. Jackson glanced downward. His guest to all appearances had broken his neck. He lay doubled up in a quiverless heap.

There issued from Jackson's throat a gloating snarl. He believed there would be no necessity of slitting the stranger's throat or tailing him in the morning. He began descending the notched pole.

Big-scar lay apparently dead. He eyed the innkeeper's feet coming toward him.

"So you broke your neck, eh?" muttered Jackson. "That saves me a lot. I'll take that belt an' chop some wood and burn you up—like I did the others."

The yegg held his breath when Jackson removed the money belt. The innkeeper was in too much of a hurry to notice that the supposed gold pieces were iron washers.

FAR away a wolf's lone howl came through the night; a cluster of stars sent light down on the frozen earth; logs cracked and a twig snapped. Jackson went to the door, barred it carefully, dragged at the yegg's heels and moved him toward the hearthstone. He rolled him on the cold embers. He then went out of the living room, by a back door through the cook shack, and began chopping great arms full of pine knots.

Big-scar compared the innkeeper's blows to a hangman building a scaffold. The yegg stared upward and saw that the chimney ran straight to the second floor.

He started removing his clothes and cocked an automatic.

"What that mountain buzzard's got comin' to him is plenty. I got tu get a confession out ov him about me pal, Micky. How'll I do it?"

"Big-scar glared at one corner of the room, where Andrew had undoubtedly hidden the poached birds. He found them and was ready for Jackson when he returned. To all appearances the yegg lay in the fireplace dead to this world. Jackson watched the blaze, backed from the heat of it, poked at the bed of hot coals, and rubbed his hands.

The black smoke blinded his usual cunning.

He thought everything had been taken care of in case Andrew returned and asked questions. The money belt was safely hidden under the floor.

There remained but to sit down and keep the fire roaring.

The innkeeper had often stated he had no conscience. The excitement of fighting the guest, disposing of possible clues, bringing in the wood, had slightly tired the old man. He started dragging a rustic-looking chair near the fireplace, paused, looked toward the cook-shack and drew his tongue along his lips. He needed a bracer; there was a quart of moonshine on the shelf, between a vinegar bottle and a

can of baking powder. Jackson went to this bottle, opened it, and gulped. He replaced the bottle, and finished moving the chair near the fireplace. He sat down and extended his legs toward the flames.

Grimly the old man watched the process of effacing evidence; he felt glad the prospector was a creature so unimportant he would never be missed.

A heat that was furnace-like issued from the cavity; Jackson dug his heels in the planks and pushed his weight away until his shins ceased baking. He crossed his legs, felt the liquor die within him, belched, then rose and leaned toward the flames. Apparently the body was not altogether consumed, the flames were dying.

The innkeeper lunged toward the woodpile, gathered up the most resinous of the sticks, and tossed them in the fireplace. He added a knotty log, then sprang back. Flames, jets of smoke, tongued vapors, rolled from the fireplace and curled around the mantel. Andrew's gun was in danger of being scorched; the clock's face blackened. Jackson watched the fire and saw it die to some degree; a shift of wind drove the flames around the edge of the stones. He moved to the cook-shack and sampled the moonshine. A fire was within him, when he returned to the chair, that was hotter than any caused by logs and sticks; he laughed in drunken victory, pulled out the hunting-knife and sliced off a piece of tobacco.

Getting on his feet he searched the room and found a short iron bar with which he jabbed the cooling mass in the fireplace. He tossed up embers, broke a log open, stabbed to the heart of the coals. There seemed no trace of bones.

"I did a good job this time," he said deep in his throat.

Above him, near the notched pole, a pair of revengeful eyes stared downward.

Jackson had infinite patience. There might be a bone uncharred or a button or something in the fireplace. He first laid down the iron bar, then went to the shack, where he emptied the bottle, then he returned and added more logs to the fire. It was a satisfying blaze that drove him to pull the chair further back, and regard his own hearthstone drunkenly.

TWO o'clock came; Jackson swung his head and eyed the barred door. It was time for Andrew to return from Arnold's. The innkeeper had little fear that his poaching son would discover any trace of the guest. The old man had made up his story: The guest was not satisfied with the accommodations at the inn and had gone on—that was all.

The dead liquor in the old man's stomach gnawed at his nerves; he twitched and squirmed. A chill crept up his legs; he shivered. Wind moaned over the stone chimney, rattled the ill-fitting sashes of the inn; the dying logs lowered the temperature. Jackson dropped his chin within the collar of his coat. He stared unseeingly at the stones at the side of the fireplace. They were cemented together, in conglomerate formation.

Suddenly his unseeing eyes opened as if drawn to a spot between the stones. He blinked, raised his chin and stared.

The spot between the stones was still there; Jackson dropped his lower jaw. Balefully he eyed this spot; a muttered series of oaths came from his throat. He got up from the chair and advanced upon the fireplace.

Out went one finger; it touched the stones.

"Blood!"

Back fell the innkeeper, his hands reached the chair; his fingers coiled around it; he gained an erect position with a great effort.

"Blood!" he repeated.

Slowly one hand came before him;

he regarded the finger that had touched the stones; it was carmine-hued. He looked at the fireplace. Was it fancy that now there was another red spot between the stones, higher up?

The innkeeper's stare roamed the stonework of the fireplace, rested upon the mound of embers, then a chilling shiver ran down the old murderer's spine. He believed the mound moved; changed shape; grew larger as if the guest was trying to come from the pile.

This fancy passed; Jackson realized that the illusion was only a trick of the flames and curling heat. He shelved forward his shoulders; with bent, shaking knees he went closer to the stones. His head lowered and he regarded the spots of blood; there were many of them—between each stone, almost.

He wiped away a spot, smeared his palm, saw another, reached for it, and tripped upon a log. The hands that grasped the mantel stone saved him from falling into the flames; he retreated and touched the chair. It maddened him; he pushed it aside and began circling the room, keeping his face over his left shoulder as he stared toward the fireplace.

Before his fevered eyes red spots danced, and the room, chilled below the freezing point, became a tormenting inquisition.

He tore off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, mopped his brow, and continued staggering in a circle, watching the stones about the fireplace. He stumbled, snarled, stopped, and saw one blood spot that had widened into a trickling stream.

"God!" he cried. "The stones are mocking me!"

He went mad, tore at his throat and shirt; bared his chest and flailed his arms in the air. Advancing, retreating, keeping the fireplace in view, he shuffled about the inn. The strength that had been his changed to water—

his brain reeled—muttered curses dropped from his trembling lips. Above him Big-scar grinned. The dancing flames from the embers wove ghostly shapes and shadows; Jackson shifted his eyes to the stones; more blood carmined the cement; the room reeked like a graveyard.

Over the innkeeper came a final rage; one that stiffened his muscles; knotted his fists; brought his chin from off his sweat-covered chest. He bent, reached, prehensively moved his fingers, then leaped toward the fireplace. He was down on his knees, tossing the embers upward; scattering brands and coals. His hair caught fire; he fell back, planted his hands on the planks, rebounded, shrieked, then pounded the floor.

A voice sounded when the air of the room was still.

"You murderer!"

JACKSON believed a grave-digger had come to take the corpse; he worked his way over the floor, clutched at the wooden bar, lifted it, and rolled back when he saw nothing outside.

Inward he staggered and started milling. Now and then he stared at the bloodspots that flecked the stones by the fireplace.

Big-scar moved away from the opening where the notched pole was and rummaged around on tiptoes until he found one of Jackson's suits and a pair of the innkeeper's boots. He put on the suit which was sizes too small for him, pocketed the automatic and sat down while he pulled on the boots.

He listened, with one ear cocked sideways.

Jackson was blabbering in the living room. He was kneeling in front of the dying fire, staring at the stones.

"Blood!" he whimpered. "I've killed

a dozen fools an' one has left blood to haunt me. I killed that lunger and that peddler and I got the two thousand from the convict Mickey Gleason. His ashes went over the cliff. He didn't leave any blood. He *didn't*!"

The yegg heard enough. The innkeeper believed the dummy Big-scar left in the fireplace had been a body.

It was time to force a confession. Sliding down the notched pole, like a fireman at a third-alarm, Big-scar landed on the floor with a thud. Jackson did not startle. Over the planks went the yegg until he leaned and reaching tapped the innkeeper's shoulder. He tapped a second time.

"I know who you are," croaked Jackson. "You're the game warden come to take me to the jail."

"Look around!" commanded Big-scar.

Jackson tore his eyes from the blood spots. He slowly swung his chin over his shoulder. His lower jaw dropped agape.

"Who am I?" asked Big-scar.

A yell issued from Jackson's throat that rattled the windows. Again the innkeeper tore his throat.

"You—you're DEATH!" he slobbered. "You're the guest I burnt up!"

Big-scar saw Jackson dart for the cook-shack door. The innkeeper stumbled, fell, raised himself and plunged outwardly. A cry sounded when he crashed through underbrush and over a cliff.

The yegg listened. He lunged over the room and lifted down three part-ridges from the shelf above the fireplace.

"Good thing," he muttered. "The murderer's son, Andrew, hid these poached birds where I found 'em. It wuz blood from these, thawin' out, that drove him tu that confession about me pal, Micky."



Sheriff Hamp Makes Good

By CYRUS CHAPIN

Six-Guns or bare fists were the same to Hamp' Meredith

"**H**OLD up your hands!" shouted Hampdon Meredith, sheriff. As Bud Keeler's hands obeyed the command, Hamp said to young Chapman, "Guy—take them guns off of him."

The boy pulled the guns from Keeler's belt and placed them back of the store counter. Hamp then removed his own shooting irons and handed them to the boy.

"Now, d—n you," said Hamp to the desperado, "come on out here in the open. I've always wanted to lick you with my bare fists."

The cow-punchers made way for the pair as they passed through the front door of the store to a place close to the road. Neither of them wore coats. Each man threw his hat to one side. Hamp's face had not changed color. Bud Keeler's face was a chalky white.

They sparred in clumsy fashion for a few seconds. Neither one knew the slightest thing about scientific boxing. Finally Hamp struck through Bud's awkward guard and landed a glancing blow across his antagonist's chin. Keeler came back with a left-hander that struck Hamp's right cheek. It jarred Hamp a little because there was considerable weight behind it. Both men were over six feet and weighed an easy two hundred apiece.

Hamp struck Bud on the point of the jaw and Bud went over backwards in a heap. The crowd laughed. This made Bud mad. That was exactly what the sheriff wanted. "He'll fight

now," thought Hamp, and he did fight to the best of his ability.

Bud smashed through a left that hit Hamp under the ear and sent him staggering backwards almost to a fall. Recovering himself he rushed towards Bud to be met by another left-hander which struck him just over the right eye. This shook Hamp up a trifle but after sparring a few passes he managed to drive through a right that landed squarely on Bud's nose. The blood spurted for an instant and ran trickling down across his chin.

Bud's face was no longer white but red. He was panting and so was Hamp. There was no such thing as rounds or time. They would fight on and on until one or both were down and out.

They stood eyeing each other for perhaps half a minute. Then they went at it again. They circled around each other sparring awkwardly. Then Bud struck out with his left and sent Hamp to the ground with a blow on the jaw. It was noticeable that the cowboys didn't laugh when the sheriff bit the dust, for they were all for the sheriff and despised the bully. Hamp came up in a flash and driving his right through his antagonist's guard sent him toppling over backwards to the earth. A volley of laughter from the cowboys greeted his downfall. He laid in the sand and dirt for a few seconds, then raised on an elbow, then got to his feet, swaying slightly as though groggy. He came at Hamp then bellowing like a bull. He

thrashed at the sheriff with both hands and one of the blows hit Hamp's right eye with a downward cut. Hamp pounded through another right and caught Bud again squarely on the nose. Another blow quickly followed this one hitting Bud in the mouth, driving his fat lips back into his teeth. The lips were bleeding now and his face was one mass of blood and dirt. He presented a fearful sight. Hamp's right eye was starting to close. Again they hesitated, panting.

Due to less whisky drinking, the sheriff was not as much winded as the desperado.

"Here—you guys, wait a minute," shouted a cow-man known as "Little Jack"—"rest up a minute 'til I call time."

But the fighters paid no attention to Little Jack or anybody else. They were at it again hammer and tongs.

Bud struck Hamp's chin with his left. Hamp reeled slightly and almost fell but recovered himself and as he did so he saw that his enemy's hands were hanging limply by his sides. Bud wasn't expecting so quick a recovery. In fact there was the semblance of a grin on his coarse features when suddenly Hamp struck two swift blows, one with his right and another with his left, straight to Bud's jaw. Bud started to fall backwards from the first blow as the second caught him and sent him down apparently for keeps. He lay there very still but the onlookers could see his great breast heaving.

Hamp stepped over to him and reaching down caught him by the shoulders. He pulled him to his feet and as he stood there swaying Hamp gasped.

"Stand up and fight, you white-livered—"

Bud tried to make a few passes at his adversary. Hamp struck a few swift blows taking in various points on the face. All at once Bud fell over against Hamp and slid down the full

length of his body onto the ground. He was still as a corpse until one of the cow-punchers doused him with a bucket of water. Then he rose with difficulty, reeled into the store and asked for his guns.

"S'll right to let him have 'em, Hamp?" asked young Guy Chapman.

"Yes," replied Hamp, "give me mine first. Can't tell about these would-be bad men."

After the recovery of his shooting irons, Bud Keeler turned without a word, went out the door, mounted his mustang and rode away in the direction of his cabin.

Hamp wouldn't listen to the praise the cow-punchers would have heaped upon him. Inherently he despised gun packers as he called them. Before he became sheriff he never carried a gun. He and John Chapman, the Indian trader (Guy's uncle), were of the same opinion, that the majority of gun packers were cowards. Of course it was all right for a man who had been threatened to pack a gun, and there were other exceptions but rare ones where a brave man might tote a gun. This was their opinion. It was founded on the fact that so many reputed bad men and killers had obtained their reputations by accident, by shooting men when they were all keyed up with bad booze, or because they couldn't help but pull a gun and shoot.

Both Hamp Meredith, the sheriff, and John Chapman, the trader, knew that Bud Keeler, leader of the old Lee West gang of desperadoes, would never have shot down Isaac Perdue if Bud hadn't been full of booze. Ike Perdue was in a still worse condition when he fumbled for his gun, and Bud managed to draw his first and shoot. That simple circumstance gave Bud Keeler a reputation that he had to sustain. And, after Lee West, sure enough bad-man, killer, desperado, train-robber, all around bandit, was mortally wounded by Bob Dalton,

U.S. Marshal, the leadership of the gang was forcibly taken over by Bud Keeler.

Had the remnants of Lee West's gang been more than half men, Hamp Meredith contended, they never would have stood for a born coward like Bud Keeler taking over the leadership. For, Hamp Meredith, John Chapman and every he-man of the Indian Territory respected Lee West even if he did rob trains in Kansas and Missouri and dash back down into the Indian nation to his stronghold. Another thing about Lee, he would fight a man in the open with his bare fists, and he took no one at a disadvantage when it could be helped. In other words he was at heart no murderer, no assassin. But this Bud Keeler was a dirty, lying, hypocritical, dastardly skunk. And so was he reputed among the better class of cow-punchers. And, his reputation among the Cheyennes whose reservation edged close to Chapman's store. The Cheyennes loathed Bud Keeler on general principles but more particularly because he had dragged the body of one of their ancient chiefs from the top of Marequah rocks and thrown the bones to the buzzards just for pure, unadulterated meanness.

TWO mornings following the fight between the sheriff and Bud Keeler, the eight horse Star-Route stage drove in from Pond Creek on the north. They stopped to change horses close to Chapman's store. The stage driver talked with Chapman and Hamp Meredith. He had news.

"Another train hold up," announced the stage driver, "close to Kiowa, sometime the early part of last night. Folks are a-sayin' it's Lee West's old gang under Bud Keeler, anyways Bud and some of his men was seen close to Kiowa at a roadhouse boozin' up. Takes booze to make sech as Bud do anything."

"How comes it you are earlier than

usual?" asked Chapman as the stage driver handed him the mail.

"Changin' the schedule," replied the driver, "an' even at that I started previous like because a friend of mine tipped it off to me that Bud Keeler was figurin' on holdin' up my stage, an' bein' as they won't allow me no guard, I can't drive four span an' handle no guns. I ain't no gunman nohow."

Sheriff Meredith's official mail consisted of reward circulars concerning several hold-ups in the edge of Kansas and Missouri. The circulars were gotten out by the railroad and express companies and the rewards were guaranteed by the governors of both states. Hamp was not concerned with the rewards, but he did want to demolish certain of the bandit gangs who made the Indian Nation their hiding place. And particularly he wanted to get Bud Keeler and his gang. It was easy enough to get Bud Keeler and even some of his men with him but so far there was no direct evidence to warrant their capture. Besides the old Lee West gang under Keeler, there were the famous Dalton's who lived with their mother just twelve miles north of Chapman's store, near Hennessey, and the Steel gang as well as the old Heimbaugh gang, but for the present Bud Keeler's band was the one Hamp Meredith was after.

"Wish I could get sumthin' on 'em," said Hamp to John Chapman. Young Guy Chapman stood close by taking in the conversation.

"More'n likely," responded John Chapman, "they'll be raisin' hell over at Reilly's joint in Kingfisher tonight."

"Yes—and there'll be plenty of talk," said Hamp, "but if I went nosin' around they'd shut up. Wish't I had somebody I could trust."

"Let me go, Hamp," put in young Guy. "They wouldn't think nuthin' o' me—I'm nuthin' but a kid. Maybe I could learn something."

John Chapman laughed and Hamp Meredith smiled as he slapped the sixteen year old upon the back in genial fashion.

"You done tol' me your paw was a Texas sheriff," said Hamp, "guess it runs in the blood all right, but you're too young, Guy. I'll think of some other way."

But young Guy knew by the way Hamp acted all that day and along towards evening, that the sheriff had not solved the problem. The officer was silent and preoccupied. Guy determined to take things into his own hands. The afternoon he spent part of the time at the Indian camp of the Cheyennes, about a mile from the store. Here he lay on the grass under a tarpaulin stretched between two wagons, watching the two girl daughters of the chief and their mother make moccasins. All the time he was thinking. He ate a fish supper with the Indians and finally at the fall of dusk he saddled his pony, Terrapin, and rode towards the Cimarron bound for Kingfisher. The two Indian girls rode with him as far as the river.

Kingfisher at this time was a bunch of shacks and an Indian trading post. Reilly's joint was nothing more nor less than a disreputable "blind pig" where inferior bootleg was sold in flagrant violation of the U.S. government laws. Guy had no difficulty gaining admission to the place; anyone except U.S. Marshals was welcome. It was a two-roomed frame shack. Reilly ate and slept in the front room and in the back was a rough board bar behind which was what he called whisky in bottles which when not in use were buried in the sand and dirt beneath the makeshift bar. When Guy entered he found Bud Keeler and several of his men drinking and talking. They paid no attention to the boy. To them he was nothing but a kid.

Keeler and his following had reached that stage of drinking where they used even less judgment than

usual. Against the bar also lounged a cow-puncher named Short. Keeler was spending freely.

"I see," Short was saying to Bud Keeler, "where you all made a killin' last night up by Kiowa. Easy money, eh Bud? Wish't I was in on it. What kind of a desperado dy'e think I'd make, Bud? Want to take me on?"

All present knew Short was joking. He was a cow-puncher part of the time and a cow-camp cook the rest of the time. He had no record as a bad man. On the contrary he was known as a very peaceable kind of an hombre.

"Practice up on the gun play a little, Short," answered Bud, "and I'll consider takin' you on. Now speakin' o' that there hold-up near Kiowa—"

He staggered slightly and looked around the room. Then, anxious to play his part as a bar-room gladiator, he proceeded to tell the whole story. Two of his men tried to keep him quiet but he cursed them and went on with his yarn. And ever and anon as he told it he would appeal to one or another of his gang to corroborate his statements. They could do nothing else but nod their heads in the affirmative and now and then say, "that's right, Bud," or "that's so, Bud—yu're right."

IN A very short time Guy Chapman had all the proof he wanted. And as Short was a good friend of his and of Hamp Meredith's and John Chapman's he knew if it came to a showdown that Short would stand by.

The boy left the place before midnight and rode the nine miles back to his uncle's place. He couldn't sleep. He was excited over what he had learned. So again he saddled Terrapin and rode through the blackjack timber, two miles to the east, to the log cabin of Cherokee Bob where Hamp Meredith lived with Bob and his family.

Hamp, accustomed to sleeping with

one eye open, heard the footfalls of Guy's pony and was at the door when the lad drew rein and jumped from the saddle. Guy's story was quickly told in all its savory details.

"That's enough," said Hamp, highly pleased. "My boy, you done noble. See you in the mornin'—or rather, see you soon for it's almost daylight now."

Noon of this day, Hamp Meredith together with John Chapman and young Guy walked from the store to the log cabin where they lunched (they called it dinner) with the stage station keeper's family. On the threshold of the cabin stood Lame Bull of the Cheyennes. The old brave was about to enter the cabin when he paused and waited for the others to approach.

"Come on in old Walloper," said Meredith, placing a friendly arm across his shoulders, "Come on in. I'll break bread with ye. I make no distinction for race, color, creed or previous condition of servitude. A ward of Uncle Sam is good enough for me. Sit down and let's eat."

Lame Bull needed no urging. After the meal at which venison, wild turkey and hot biscuit were served in generous proportions, Hamp took Lame Bull to one side.

"You savvy Bud Keeler," began Hamp, "you know him for heap bad hombre. He most foully desecrated the tomb of your ancestor. I want you to get Blue Bear, Red Wolf and young White Shield and meet me at Cherokee Bob's place just before daylight tomorrow morning. Then—we go get 'em Bud Keeler. Savvy?"

"Me savvy," grinned Lame Bull.

That afternoon Hamp Meredith told John Chapman he wanted to have a serious talk with him. They walked across the short strip of prairie back of the trading post to Big Turkey creek where they sat down on the bank of the stream close to an old Beaver dam. Being midsummer the

day was hot but the spreading limbs of an elm tree shaded them from the sun. They smoked their pipes and Hamp proceeded to have his say.

"'Spite of the fact we've been friends some years," began Hamp, "you don't know much about me. I'm tellin' you something now for a couple of reasons. First, I'm goin' after Bud Keeler and his gang early tomorrow mornin'. Bein' as they've got some advantage on account of their nestin' on top of Marequah rocks, I might be killed. So I'm inclined to tell you about my folks. I come of the Merediths of St. Louis. You know that already, but what you don't know is that the Merediths are some punkins. They're not only rich as all get out but they're white folks, blue stockings and all that stuff. I'm the black sheep."

"Same as I am in my family," smiled Chapman.

"Yep—same thing, only in a way we don't deserve the title. The only thing you and me ever done was—nuthin'. That's the whole trouble. We've simply been guilty of runnin' away and stayin' away from the home roost. Anyhow—in case of my bein' killed, you're to write my folks. Here's the address, and tell 'em for my old father's and mother's sake how I died tryin' my best to be sumthin' except a black sheep."

"Second," went on the sheriff, "there's a girl—"

"A girl?" smiled Chapman, "I never knew you—"

"Nope. Nobody's known it but the girl and me. Her folks think she's done forgot me after ten years. Well, she ain't. Lately I took and wrote her a letter. Incidentally she's also a blue blood. And she answered my letter and tells me that she has up and told her paw all about me bein' sheriff down here and tryin' to make good. Her old man—this all sounds like a story-book—her old man is president of the St. Louis and San Francisco

road what's been robbed off and on by these here gangs I'm after. And, it just happens that Bud Keeler held up said road the other night. Hell is a-poppin! My girl says if I trap the gang what's been doin' these hold-ups, her old man will let her have her way. In other words, we can get married. Puttin' two and two together, I'm certain Bud Keeler and his gang are the ones that have done all the depredations on this particular railroad that my girl's dad is president of. So—in case I'm not killed—I'll git Bud Keeler and his gang and—well, you can finish the story your own way."

"Glad you told me, Hamp," replied Chapman, "and if you take plenty of men with you—you'll get Keeler and his band all right. You'll—"

"That's just it," interrupted Meredith, knocking the ashes from his pipe and filling it again. "That's just it—I'm goin' a trifle short-handed. And—no white men. All Indians but me and Cherokee Bob who's half Cherokee, same as an Indian almost."

"But why?" asked Chapman puzzled. "Why run that risk?"

"Hell," answered Hamp, "there'd be no credit to me if I took an army. No sir, I'm gonna give Bud Keeler and his men the best of it both as to numbers and position. Then, if I succeed—farewell to the black sheep record. See?"

"Yes, I see. If it was anybody else but you, Hamp—I'd say you were a fool. But, I understand. You're right. But, be careful Hamp—don't take any more chances than you can help."

"I should say not. Besides, what better men could I have than Blue Bear, Lame Bull, Red Wolf, young White Shield and Cherokee Bob? They are the pick of the nation. Cunning, expert shots and four of them Injuns have got a reason—the defiling of old Marequah's tomb."

THE small cavalcade met at Cherokee Bob's cabin just before dawn. Cherokee Bob's wife had batter cakes and coffee for them in abundance. Sheriff Meredith knew there could not be less than nine bandits all told, and the fact that their stronghold was on top of Marequah rocks gave the bandits a big advantage. The hill was a mass of rocks and bowlers with a few black-jack oaks and scattered underbrush growing here and there. On top of the hill was a flat space of half an acre on which stood a straw-roofed log cabin which faced the west. Southeast of the cabin a few yards was a small corral and a stable for the horses. Close to the stable on the west a few feet was a one story stone hut supposed to contain a still. A trail led to the top from the west. Back of the stable was a sheer precipice, the top of which frowned down upon the black-jack forest like a small Gibraltar. To the north and east of the buildings, the hill was so abrupt and rock strewn, it could only be approached on foot. Across from the hill to the east was a smaller hill also strewn with rocks and boulders.

Hamp and his following were all mounted on Indian ponies and armed with six shooters and rifles. As the first streaks of dawn shown in the east, the little troop moved through the forest, their Indian ponies making but little noise as they wound in and out among the trees. Birds sang and occasionally a wild turkey rose and winged its way through the tree-tops. A handsome buck deer pranced lightly by in the distance, followed by two does and a couple of fawns.

"We'll have a little fun with this scum," said Hamp to his followers, "before we settle down to business. And boys—be sure you shoot 'em as far as possible, in the legs. Don't want to kill 'em if it can be avoided. Want to take 'em alive."

Across Lame Bull's shoulders hung

bow and arrows. Besides these he of course had his rifle and pistols. Although Hamp said nothing he could surmise why Lame Bull had his bow and arrows.

"Bob," said Hamp, "you and White Shield swing 'round to the west side of the hill. Our friends might take a notion to try and duck down the trail. Blue Bear, you and Red Wolf and Lame Bull come with me."

Red Wolf proposed that he climb the precipice and occupy a place behind the stable. The sheriff approved this plan and after Red Wolf left them, he and the two remaining Indians threw the reins over their horses' heads and started up the eastern side of the small hill. They dropped down behind a large boulder.

So far there were no evidences of life in or around the cabin. No smoke issued from the chimney and no men appeared in sight. No doubt the band had indulged in a big drunk the night before. They would now be sleeping it off. But the "next morning" business didn't mean much in this instance for Bud Keeler and his band of assassins were hard boiled, vicious drinkers with cast iron stomachs.

Hamp motioned to Blue Bear to seek another boulder so as to give everyone more elbow room. They waited patiently. At last the figure of a man came around the corner of the house and made for the stone-house.

"He's after his morning's morning," said Hamp to Lame Bull. "Heap plenty firewater—eh—Lame Bull."

The Indian grinned. They saw the man come out of the stone house with a bright tin dipper in one hand. He held it aloft as though in salutation of the rising sun. The sheriff nudged his companion who already had his rifle sighted over the top of a rock to one side of the boulder.

"B-a-n-g!" cracked the rifle as the tin dipper flew from the would-be drinker's grasp and the echoes of the shot sounded far out across the for-

est. The man started for the cabin on a run. As the sheriff had motioned Blue Bear and Lame Bull to withhold their fire for the moment, the runner reached the cabin. In another minute he was out with a string of men behind him all carrying rifles. Hamp counted nine men in all including of course the leader, Bud Keeler. The odds were satisfactory to him. Nine to six. "Good!" he exclaimed, then signalled the two Indians to get busy.

Two of the bandits fell, shot in the legs as near as Hamp could tell from a distance. They soon saw the futility of shooting towards the boulders, and all ran for the cabin, the two wounded men being assisted by their companions. Soon it was apparent they were knocking the plaster kinks from between the logs to make port-holes through which they could poke their rifles.

"Hell's bells!" grunted Hamp, to Lame Bull, "They'll stay in there until we starve 'em out, unless—"

AS THE thought occurred to him, Lame Bull was already busy with his bow and arrow. Around the base of the arrowhead he wrapped cotton soaked in oil. He struck a match and lighted the cotton, and bending the bow—the length of himself—backwards until it formed half a circle, he released his shaft which soared swiftly through the air and fell on the hot dry straw of the cabin roof. Another flaming arrow quickly followed the first one and soon the roof was in flames. Within a few minutes the fire had taken hold of the logs and the bandits driven out by the smoke and heat, came out and started on a run for the stables.

"B-a-n-g! B-a-n-g!"

Rapidly the rifle shots sang out from the eastern hill as well as from the trail on the west, however these last shots from the fact the range was a poor one, for the time went wild. Nevertheless Blue Bear, Lame Bull

and the sheriff had downed two men who dragged themselves towards the stable after their companions. The horses soon emerged one by one with the desperadoes in the saddles.

"Shame to wound them horses," thought Hamp, "can't be helped."

One horse went down, then another. Because of his extraordinary height, Bud Keeler could be seen on horseback in advance of the others, making for the western trail.

Hamp's rifle spoke and the horse went down. Keeler extricated himself from the saddle and took refuge in the stone hut. The rider next to him succeeded in getting to the trail and could be seen no more.

"One of 'em has got away," thought Hamp, "unless Cherokee Bob or White Shield gets him."

Another of the riders reached the top of the trail and was prepared to plunge downward at a gallop when the horse fell crippled and the rider got away.

Bud Keeler was shooting towards the two boulders behind which Hamp and his two Indians were intrenched but not a single one of his shots took the desired effect. Once only did one of his bullets snip a small piece of wood from Blue Bear's gun-stock. Four of the mounted men, somewhat delayed by the two riders who had preceded them had almost reached the western trail when Red Wolf shot one of the riders in the shoulder and another in the side. He cursed in his own tongue because of not being able to get them in their legs as the sheriff had instructed. The two wounded men started to crawl back to the stable, shooting occasionally towards the boulders as best they could.

The two remaining riders succeeded in reaching the western trail and started downwards when they encountered Cherokee Bob and White Shield. Fighting on the hillside neither side had cover that amounted to much. Only an occasional rock or tree

offered slight protection. Hence in the duel that followed both Cherokee Bob and White Shield were shot. Cherokee Bob's wound was a light one on the shoulder, but White Shield's leg was broken. Notwithstanding this the Indian crawled upwards and brought one of the fleeing men down with a shot in the thigh. The other runaway was accounted for by Cherokee Bob who, through an error, shot his man through the heart.

When the smoke of battle for the time being at least had slightly lifted, Hamp gathered his small party on top of Marequah Rocks. One dead man lay on the trail and of the eight others, Bud Keeler was within the stone hut with the door by this time closed and locked—and seven wounded bandits lay groaning on the ground. Lamé Bull and Blue Bear looked after young White Shield's broken leg and after that gave the wounded bandits some necessary attention. Cherokee Bob would not consent to having his wound looked after.

"It's nuthin', boss," said he to Hamp, "what gits me is I can't shoot no more. Tried to git that guy in the leg an' 'stead o' that I nicked him in the heart. He's dead." Of course he referred to the man he had left lying on the trail.

All the bandits save Bud Keeler still within the stone hut had given up their guns, and were evidently glad it was over. The Sheriff's eyes searched the sky. Suddenly he stood up and pointed to the heavens.

"Lookee—fellows!" said he, "see that air d—d buzzard. There's another one—one, two, three. Mighty funny how them birds always knows when somethin' is dead. They're after that body lyin' on the trail."

"And," continued the sheriff, "there's yet another buzzard closer by. A human buzzard and his name is Bud Keeler. How 'bout it, Bud?"

The sheriff stood before the door

of the hut. In neither hand did he carry a gun.

"Might as well come out, Bud," called the sheriff. His tone was quiet, kind in fact. "Might as well come out, but when you do come out, Bud, be sure your hands are in the air and that they are as empty as the day you was born."

"I'll count three until you come out, Bud," continued Hamp, "and if you're not out by the third count, we'll have to kill you instead of lettin' you hang after your trial."

"One—two—three!"

And at the third count, the door of the hut flew open and Bud Keeler came out with his hands in the air. He said nothing. He allowed himself to be disarmed and let them bind his hands behind his back. The sheriff only had one pair of handcuffs and those he kept for state occasions. All

the bandits except the dead one were soon bound and tied onto the horses that were able to travel. Some of them must ride double. The wounded horses were killed to put them out of their misery.

Red Wolf and Blue Bear stayed behind to bury the dead man. This didn't take them long, and they soon caught up with the others. The entire party rode up to Chapman's store as the trader and his nephew, Guy, came out to meet them. Young Guy smothered tears of rage that he hadn't been allowed to go with the party.

"D—n this business of bein' a kid," said he.

"It's all right my boy," grinned Hamp, "you'll git old soon enough. And you done your part. You'll be the star witness in the trials of these here guzaybows. And after that you can be best man at my weddin'."

GUNS OF BLACK MESA

By CLAUDE RISTER

The rumbling guns of range war greeted Blaze Rockwell as he fogged his bronc into the Black Mesa country. The Bar J. B. killers and the hired gunman of the Crescent 2 were on his welcoming committee. He didn't take sides and he wasn't neutral—yet, his sixes burned red hot!

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Trouble's Trail Is Long

By BUCK SHANNON

Forty-fives roaring. Death rates soaring. Trouble. Trail is long.

DESPITE the atmosphere of electric-charged tenseness, lank, range-garbed Newt Randall hummed in seeming carelessness. Outside the ranch house the mountain range country was doubly black from nightfall and the near approach of a long threatened cloudburst. Inside the large plainly furnished living room was a feel of brooding suspicion and mistrust. But if Randall's relaxed cross-legged position in the old wooden ranch rocker appeared disinterested, it was appearance only. Beneath his boyishly tumbled thatch of straw colored hair his lean, darkly tanned features were thoughtful. His steely gray eyes stared with probing directness at the hotly flushed and admittedly handsome face of Dude Mapes, then curiously at old Dirk Hays.

"Yuh—yuh mean to tell me we've got to settle the deal *tonight*? It's near twenty miles over mountain trail through cattle-feud country—the men all in town whoopin' it up till no tellin' when—and that yuh're already countin' yoreself out?" Grizzled old Dirk Hays leaned forward as if doubting his hearing as he summed the facts up. "Then it's a put-up job? And Cash Warton is breakin' his agreement?" Hays asked hopefully.

Mapes held up his hand. "No! He isn't breaking his word. But with you and the Bow-and-Arrow outfit locking horns like you are and the cattle running into such money Warton's care-

ful. You know far back in the mountains as he is, he's had more than one bunch of stock stampeded and rustled in route to delivery points. So he told me he was still willing to sell at the price you'd agreed on last month. But that it had to be in cash at his ranch before he'd start with them. And that if he didn't get it by breakfast time in the morning he'd sell to the Bow-and-Arrow who had made him a similar cash offer. That's clear to me," Mapes ended.

In his fury, pretense fell away, and with the gesture of a gambler spreading all his cards Hays leaned forward. "It's clear to yuh, huh? Then get this clear too. Last month after I made the purchase agreement with Warton I *sold them same cattle again*, promis-in' delivery in six weeks! As yuh know I've sold my own range short because of the high prices, and everybody else hereabouts has done the same. To buy outside to fill that big order would cost me a fortune. So I got the money at the bank yesterday, twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, and sent yuh to tell Warton to start his drive toward Bed Ground Junction, and that I'd pay him there. I was goin' over in the buckboard with Newt and the men tomorrow or next day, soon as one of Warton's men come with word Warton had arrived with the stock. That's how things stand. Then yuh come amblin' back after nine o'clock tonight and tell me Warton's got to have the money paid *at his ranch* by breakfast in the

mornin'—and that yuh're too tired to go back with it," Hays ended hotly.

Dude Mapes colored and his eyes dropped. Then with a wave toward the window he faced Hays defiantly. "Look out there—at those clouds, and lightning flashes! Its been holding off for days and likely to break any minute. Besides, with the Bow-and-Arrow outfit standing ready to buy those cattle in the morning you can bet they're going to see that the road tonight between here and Warton's is mighty dangerous traveling!"

Son of a wealthy friend who had made his money on the range and then moved to the city, "Dude" Mapes had been sent out to Hays' to learn the cattle business from the hoofs up—but had promptly proved a failure at any sort of real work. Disliking to admit the truth to his old friend, and as he himself was partly disabled from a Bow-and-Arrow bullet, Hays had given Mapes a place in the ranch house and a hand in the ranch affairs. The arrangement necessitated Newt Randall's partly taking orders from Mapes, and gave Mapes an advantage with pretty Dorothy Hays. Because of this, bitter jealousy had sprung up between the two men. Then—

"I'll take your money, Hays!" With a repressed tenseness that caused the words to fairly crackle Randall spoke out. Up to the present, his foreman duties over Hays' sweeping foothill and mountain country DH range had kept him fully occupied; the money matters of buying and selling he left to Hayes and Mapes. But with his present words Randall launched himself fully into Hays' affairs. Uncrossing his legs he rose and reached for the big curled-edged hat he'd tossed to the table upon entering. "You write a note to Warton, and do it and the money up in a pack while I catch a horse," Randall directed. Then he stiffened as Mapes got to his feet, face red and fists clenched.

"Who asked you to butt in?" Mapes

sneered. "You'll take twenty-five thousand dollars in cash back into the mountains on a stormy night, heh? That's a nice offer—but *where* will you take it?"

DUDE MAPES reckoned without the pent-up wrath that their positions had instilled in the lank young DH foreman; or of Randall's eagerness to carry the thing through now that he'd declared himself. Lithely as a mountain lion, Randall's body tensed and glided toward Mapes. Mapes paled—hesitated—then his hand leaped to the big scroll ornamented .45 at his hip, and up. For a fleeting uncounted space Newt Randall stared death in the face as Mapes' huge black-muzzled gun covered him. Clearly he heard the hammer mechanism click. Then his swishing, leathery knuckles collided solidly with Mapes' smooth jaw.

Groaning, Dude Mapes staggered back. The gun roared harmlessly. Slipping from his nerveless fingers it clattered to the floor. With jaw sagging Mapes stared vacantly. For a moment it looked as though he would recover. Then his eyes shut and he slumped to the floor.

Old Dirk Hayes' eyes twinkled grimly. "He's knocked out. Looks like yuh've clenched that money carryin' job for certain now, Newt," he drawled to the excited Randall. "Here, help me carry Dude to his room. Then we'd better get yuh started," Dirk said briskly. "Dot, go to the kitchen and bring a dipper of water," Dirk added in a louder voice as the click of small shoe heels hurried toward them along the hallway.

The steps retreated; and by the time the men had reached his room with Dude Mapes, Dorothy Hays entered. Seventeen years old and plump and pretty as a half opened rosebud, "Dot" Hayes was the pride of her father and the distraction of his two right hand men. Both Mapes and Ran-

dall loved her. But it had seemed to Newt Randall that Dot favored Mapes. And he was not greatly surprised now that her eyes widened in anger as she learned what ailed Mapes.

But old Dirk Hays cut off any questions with an abrupt gesture. "Never mind now, Dot. Stay here and sprinkle water on Dude 'till he comes to while me and Newt get about some work we've got to do," he directed, returning to the living room.

"Just a minute and I'll give yuh that money and a note to Cash Warton. Yuh heard the talk and know what it's all about. Take a brace of good guns with yuh. Get the best horse yuh can catch—and if yuh hurry yuh maybe a good ways 'fore the storm breaks," Hays barked, seating himself at the table and writing as he talked.

Newt Randall grinned exultantly as old Dirk Hays shortly after handed him the neatly wrapped package, and saw him through the door with a hearty slap on the shoulder and a gruff *good-luck!* There was much at stake besides his own wish to make good. Hays' money profit or loss on the cattle. The overwhelming prestige the DH would lose and the Bow-and-Arrow gain if Hays failed to secure the cattle. In fact, Randall suspected that upon the success of his mission depended Hays' continued existence as a rancher in the hotly contested territory. Randall knew too that many things could happen overnight along twenty miles of storm swept mountain road. But he resolved grimly that come-what-may the money was going to be delivered.

Then Randall's thoughts stopped and he halted abruptly as Dorothy Hays' figure emerged from an open sided equipment shed. "What are you doin' out here, Dot? Where's Dude? What do you want?" Randall asked quickly.

The girl stepped close. "Dude's in the house, and all right. He's told me his side of what happened. But I want to hear your side of it—from *you*, Newt," she said quietly.

Randall stared from the girl to the closely banked clouds through which forked flashes of lightning and rumbles of thunder came ominously. It was the first time Dorothy Hays had taken such an interest in him; and even while his common sense urged him to be off his pulse leaped with the realization of her change.

Sensing his hesitation the girl moved nearer, gazing at him appealingly—and of a sudden Randall nodded and began to talk. Honestly, he recounted what had passed in the ranch. How Dude Mapes had gotten in late from Wartons, and refused to go on the night mission. How *he* had volunteered; and of the words and fight that followed.

Many minutes later, interrupted by the first huge warm splashes of rain drops of the oncoming storm, Newt Randall came to himself with a start. Feeling somewhat foolish, he shook off the girls further detaining hand and moved hurriedly into the night. Shortly after, mounted on a wirily built but muscular saddle horse he swung abruptly into the black storm torn mountains.

Almost as if his start was a given signal the storm burst with all the violence that a mountain country cloud-burst can summon. The rain fell in a solid pelting downpour, with a force that rested on horse and rider like the weight of a gigantic hand. Through it raging gusts of wind tore and lessened. Leaping from a ridge end or ravine mouth it beat at the lone rider like the slap of mighty wings; then fled howling through the spruce tree tops and broken rocks. Again the downpour would set in; only to be interrupted by another onslaught of wind.

SLUMPED in the saddle with eyes half shut and reins loose Newt Randall forged doggedly into the teeth of the storm. Unable to see a yard before him, yet feeling strangely uneasy over the time lost in talking to the girl, he determined in spite of all obstacles to keep going. Rapidly the trip ceased to be a ride and became a nightmare of lashing rain overhead and surging torrents underfoot. Twice his mount lost its footing and man and horse went down in a rolling heap of pawing hoofs and writhing slicker garbed rider. But each time Randall managed in the darkness to hold to the bridle and quiet the frightened horse. Bruised of body and grimed and scratched of face he remounted. During a brief flash of lightning on one of the falls he thought he detected fresh hoof-marks in the gravelly mud. But after waiting impatiently for more lightning he mounted and with spur and quirt working he surged recklessly onward.

Once or twice it came to Randall to wonder that he met no one—to marvel that grim fighting Jep Tatum owner of the Bow-and-Arrow should even in the face of such a storm leave the trail unguarded. But this thought was rapidly lost in the immediate, ever present necessity of keeping his position in the saddle, and keeping his horse on the trail.

How long he rode, Newt Randall had no idea. So great was his concentration on the task in hand that it was with a feel of surprise, of quickness, when his horse paused by a corral fence and he made out faintly the glow of a light from a house window. He had reached Cash Warton's. But in spite of this fact Randall had a feel that amounted to certainty now that his real danger was still ahead. That something grim and brooding and sinister stared from the darkened old house through its single yellow eye of window.

Shrugging off the sensation Ran-

dall dismounted and squashed toward the house in his water filled boots. For a moment he paused on the soggy porch, listening. Then knocked, and at the gruff *come in* of reply he pushed open the door and entered. Pausing again just inside he stared swiftly about. Instead of diminishing, the feel of danger had increased. But try as he would the DH foreman could see nothing suspicious. The big ranch room might almost have been the one he had earlier sat in with Hays and Mapes. Several chairs were scattered about. In one corner was an old fashioned sofa. Near the center of the room at a big plain table which served also for a desk sat a grizzled figure he guessed to be Cash Warton.

But with the table lamp between himself and his caller and with the cave-like blackness of a curtained hallway behind him the stooped, whiskered form reminded Randall more of a huge and hairy spider at the mouth of its den, as he moved forward and seated himself in the chair the other motioned to.

"I'm Cash Warton. I guess yuh're from Hays' or yuh wouldn't be out on a night like this. That bein' the case yuh've got that money I sent him word I'd be wantin' to clench our deal; so let's have it," he snapped.

Unfastening his slicker Randall drew out the twenty-five thousand dollar package of bills and tossed it on the table. "There's your money—and a note with it. I guess that'll fix things up. Since I've never met you though and there not bein' anyone else present maybe you'd better sort of identify yourself some way," Randall began—then broke off and froze stiffly in his seat, body tense and eyes staring.

The rancher's shoulders made a brief twitching gesture. His knotted right hand rose above the table edge, bony fingers clasping the butt of a huge blackly gleaming .45. With the gun muzzle centered unwaveringly on

Randall's throat and his beady eyes gleaming greedily his free hand swooped forward upon the packet of bills.

"Yeah. That'll fix things up fine. But never mind the identifyin'. Now get the hell out of here—less yuh want me to write yuh a receipt with this!" he snarled, twitching the pistol ominously to indicate the sort of receipt he meant. At the same moment faintly but clearly above the continuing roar of the storm Randall caught a ghostly jeer of laughter from the darkened hallway!

The fiendish guffaw alarmed the DH foreman far more than the gun he faced. He had never been imaginative. Had never let his nerves get away from him to the point of hearing things. Yet he recognized that voice as one from which he should now be separated by twenty miles of storm tossed mountain road. *It had been Dude Mapes!*

Tense, with nerves stretched like over-tight fiddle strings, Randall sat back in his chair. The move, seemingly a natural one away from the menacing gun, allowed him a straight glance beyond the leaning figure toward the hallway. With the curtains drawn as they were, only a yawning well of blackness showed at first. Then as he gazed there came a roll of thunder and a trembling blue-white flare of lightning. For a split second space it lit fully the rain drenched landscape without and the house within. But in that brief time Newt Randall had seen all he wished—and more! Ranged along the wall in the hallway beyond the curtains he'd glimpsed the tensely crouched forms of half a dozen grim faced range clad men! One of them, mud spattered but grinning in wolfish triumph was Dude Mapes!

WITH equal lightning flash clearness Newt Randall realized also now what had happened. Cash War-

ton and his men *had* started with the cattle as agreed—and Mapes had lied! Knowing that Newt Randall would be the logical man to carry the money, Mapes had visited the Bow-and-Arrow headquarters and told Jep Tatum that Warton's place would be empty that night and that Randall carrying the huge sum of cash would visit Warton's! Returning purposely late to Hays' Mapes had first played sick, and later in the fight had acted as though knocked out so that Randall would be sent. Between them they had planned the present arrangement. Mapes would doubtless get the lion's share of the money—and put Randall in a permanently bad light through losing it. If missed from the ranch he could say he had relented and gone on to overtake and accompany Randall—and his word would be as good as Randall's. With the twenty-five thousand dollars gone the Bow-and-Arrow men would have accomplished their purpose of delaying Hays' deal—and bankrupt him!

It was a clever plan—and the girl had aided Mapes! Her sudden appearance and her request for an explanation had not been because of an interest in Randall, but to delay him while Mapes got a start ahead of the storm! Bitterly Randall realized it was *his* fault that this last had happened. Because of his folly in stopping he had failed old Dirk Hays. Moreover he had likely won only the girl's scorn at being so easily fooled—*bah!*

With almost a spoken growl of self contempt Newt Randall shrugged off the clutching sensation of failure. Only a split second space had passed since the lightning flash, and by the still smugly satisfied look of the man across from him and the quiet from the darkened room he knew his discovery was unknown. Now suddenly, recklessly, he galvanized into a grim and deadly fighting machine from which the bitter realization of trick-

ery and deceit had robbed of caution or care.

Tensing his right leg beneath the table he kicked out viciously. Facing his opponent as he was Randall's boot-toe struck the grizzled gunman squarely on one shin. There was a howl of pain and surprise. Then the other's face grimaced murderously, and his arm tensed. The huge weapon facing Randall roared deafeningly—so close that the flash of burning powder scorched his face and stung his nostrils. But the kick had caused the gun muzzle to jerk slightly upward, missing.

Before another shot could be fired Newt Randall moved again, with deadly catlike quickness. Lifting the table edge with his left hand and drawing his gun with the other he rose. The lamp shot forward across the tilting table, struck the floor with a crash and went out! There was a wild oath of alarm and fury from the grizzled gunman. A red tongue of flame licked wickedly out and the table Randall had tilted edgewise between himself and his foe quivered from the impact of a heavy bullet.

This time Newt Randall was ready! With his own gun resting on the tilted table edge he fanned it rapidly, grimly. *Bang, bang, bang*—three times, flaming red jets of death stabbed from his gun muzzle toward the spot the flash had come from.

At the third shot a gasping oath and the sound of a heavy fall told Randall his shots had taken effect and he ceased—not a moment too soon! At almost the same second he became aware of an infuriated stir from beyond the curtains. Swiftly he backed out of range of the hallway, holding the tilted table before him. Hardly had he done so when there was a grunted order. Then a roaring red hail of lead swept the space where the table had stood. Guessing their man had been killed, the others had fired a sweeping fusillade into the room!

Grinning thinly Randall groaned and thudded his soggy booted heels heavily on the floor in a sound like the falling man had made—then as there came a rush of feet along the hall he grimly emptied his gun into the blackly yawning hallway mouth! Beyond the curtain there was an unmistakable shriek, the crash of a falling form and the sound of another voice swearing in pain.

Realizing themselves tricked the men leaped back. Spreading out along the wall some of them began to search the living room with stabbing red jets of gun fire. Others that had crept outside through a back door jammed gun butts through the front windows. This was followed by leaping spurts of flame. To Newt Randall the scene became a nightmare of rolling thunder and flashing lightning without, and shots, oaths and flashes of gun fire within.

A MINUTE passed—another—and another. Abruptly the guns had ceased to roar. Except for the storm everything had grown suddenly quiet. Ominously so, Newt Randall thought as he vainly strained his ears for the slightest human sound. Then a sound came to the listeners ears that sent a cold tingle along his spine. From the rear of the house came an unmistakable snapping crackle!

Realizing the cost of life it would take to rush him, the men had slipped from the house and set it afire! Their fury was up. The money temporarily forgotten. What they wanted now was revenge—for the grizzled man that lay dead in the room, and for another three that sprawled lifelessly along the gory fire-lit shambles of hallway!

Revenge was what they'd get—and soon—Randall sensed gloomily. To remain five minutes longer in the fire and smoke filled building would mean death. It meant equally certain death to leave and face the guns of the infuriated men outside! For a brief

space the DH foreman pondered. Then his decision was made—to *go out!* Crawling swiftly toward the center of the room he twisted the packet of money from the dead mans clutching hand. Replacing it in his pocket he rose to his feet, and stripped off his slicker for freer action. Briefly his thumbs hitched at his crossed gun belts jerking them into the handiest possible position. Then with face set like red bronze in the glow of the burning house Randall strode grimly forward. In a sudden flashing move he leaped sideways through the doorway—to be met by a slashing fusillade of lead that cut and splintered the woodwork about him. Scrambling and sliding like a ball player making base, he ran across the rain soaked porch—flattening temporarily behind the scant shelter of a clump of yard shrubbery. Whipping both guns from their holsters he fired them alternately at the points he'd noted the flashes come from.

Instantly the others replied in a volley that stung Randall's face with clipped twigs and mud from its nearness. Stretched flat on the ground with face against the wet earth he waited—hands busily reloading his emptied guns. He couldn't stay there he knew—and he didn't intend to. With the guns reloaded he drew up his knees and elbows, for a leaping upright spring. Then relaxed and lay still, jaw sagging and eyes staring.

To his astonished eyes and ears there had come suddenly from the trail a lurid rattling burst of gun-fire. This was immediately followed by a series of savage yells—of pounding hoofs. Shadowy, hugely terrible in the fire glow a group of horsemen charged from the darkness, guns gleaming, mounts straining.

Deliberately, furiously they charged upon the spot that concealed Randall's besiegers. Continuously, maddeningly the guns of the two sides crashed and flamed as the horse-

men surged forward. Like devils rising from secret caverns, hidden figures leaped from their hiding places, some fighting grimly, others running toward the corral shed where their mounts were picketed. Rapidly the fight scattered; became a grim man to man affair about the outbuildings and along the corral fence.

Warily Randall stared about. Then at sight of a lone, mounted figure gazing toward the flaming house his pulse seemed to miss a beat, then leap wildly. There could be no mistake—it was Dorothy Hays. Springing from his place of concealment he waved joyously. A moment later the two stood side by side. But before he could say anything the girl began to talk in a gasping rush of words. "Dude lied to me. He said you were putting him at a disadvantage so as to show up well with Dad and me, and that you were going to steal Dad's money. Believing him, I let him go and talked to you till he got a start. Then I learned the truth of what had happened from Dad—and realized the truth of something else. So when the men got back from town I made them stay right on their horses and we come on to help you," the girl ended.

Newt Randall nodded. "You got here in a mighty handy time," he said. Then with an uncertain hoping against hope expression on his face he asked. "You mentioned about havin' learned the truth of somethin' else. What was it? I mean—was it concernin' how you felt toward me and Dude—I mean that you might like me a little more than you do him?" he asked awkwardly.

"No," Dorothy Hays shook her head with an emphatic gesture that sent little drops of water from her curly bobbed hair. Then at the tall puncher's look of dismay she added softly. "I didn't realize that I liked you a little better than Dude—but *that I liked you a whole lot better!*"

Black Satan

By W. HOMER DARBY

*"Black Satan" was a thief . . . a rogue . . . and a killer
but, some horse.*

THE day was brasslike in its intensity of heat and sunshine on parched ground and multi-colored rock. The slight breeze that blew in fitful gusts seemed but to fan the blazing furnace that was the Arizona desert-land into more fearful blasts of heat. It was a place for lizards and rattlers, but not for man.

Into this limbo rode three men on jaded mounts. The former were haggard, unshaven, parched. Their nerves were high strung, their tempers on edge. They had ridden far in pursuit of a shadow—a shadow which knew not thirst, fatigue, or hunger—a shadow of endurance and power, and as elusive as chain lightning—Black Satan.

Black Satan, a wild stallion, killer, thief, and rogue. Men told of the many other stallions he had slain or maimed, and of the horse herds he had stolen from the ranches. Never had he felt a rope, or known the confinement of a corral. Men had sought to capture him, only to ride their horses to death, or to turn in flight when the great black stallion started to fight back. It was even whispered that he was a phantom—perhaps the ghost of some dead horse, come to work havoc among the ranches.

The three who rode in pursuit had come far. For ten days, they had suffered hardships such as only those who ride in the badlands know. From a ranch far to the northeast where the great stallion had killed Blueblood

King, a valuable stud, they had determinedly followed him until their horses were exhausted and sore of hoof. Yet Black Satan had been like a shadow—untiring, elusive.

One of the three shifted his weight in the saddle and drew from his pocket a tattered plug of tobacco from which he bit off a chew, then offered it to his companion. He chewed ruminatively for some seconds, then spoke to the man beside him: "If we don't find some water damn' quick, we're a goin' tuh walk out uh this here desert. My hoss is shore some wore out."

The other grunted. "Hell; thet Black Satan has got tuh drink *some*-time. If we're on his trail I reckon we'll hit water. *If* we're on his trail. He looked ahead at the third member of the group who rode in advance of the other two. "Yuh still think thet stallion went this way?"

The third man looked back and nodded. "I'm sure of it."

The man who had first spoke wiped the perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand. "Thet animal's name shore fits him. Only the devil'd choose this hole in hell for his stamp-in' ground."

At that moment the horse in the lead raised his head and whinnied, quickening his pace. "Water," grunted the rider. A few minutes more brought them to a small spring. The water seeped into a basin-like stratum of rock rimmed with alkali, then was absorbed by a parched layer of soil

which bore a scant growth of vegetation. Men and horses drank together at the spring, saddles were removed and the animals staked out to graze.

They were an odd crew, these three. Each one different in character and appearance. Jess Rand, the one who had prophesied that they would walk out of the desert, was a mountain of a man, tall and heavily built, wearing a perpetual scowl on his heavy-jowled, sensual face. His partner, Lew Stevens, was short and slender, almost gaunt. His watery blue eyes were shifty, his manner furtive. The third member, Phil Harvey, better known as Navajo, seemed out of place in the company of the other two, for there was about him an air of rugged cleanliness. He was tall and lithe, his eyes dark brown, his hair black. Because of an eagle eye which gave him an almost uncanny ability at stalking, he had earned his nickname. It was this skill which had brought him in company with Rand and Stevens, on the trail of Black Satan.

James Olson, owner of the Triangle O Ranch, and of Blueblood King whom the great black stallion had killed, had offered five hundred dollars for his capture.

Talk around the tiny campfire was meager and desultory. Harvey sat a little apart, gazing silently into the blaze. He was never a talkative person, and the stilted conversation of his companions held little of interest for him.

AT THE first sign of dawn, the three were out of their blankets and boiling coffee, for he who pursues a shadow has little time for repose. While they were sitting before their fire, there came from the east a shrill blast. They looked up. The sharp eyes of Navajo were the first to discover the source of the sound. "Black Satan!" he cried and pointed.

Scarcely a quarter of a mile away upon the crest of a hillock of broken

stone and sandy earth the great black stallion stood facing them. A breeze rippled his ebon black mane. He shook his head defiantly, and again his whistling blast fell upon the stillness of the badlands. In his statusque pose, outlined against the brightening sky, he seemed gigantic—mighty—awe-inspiring. The three men stood spell-bound. Then an edge of the sun crept above the hillock, and spears of gold shot out and touched the glossy hide of the phantom horse; he wheeled and disappeared, leaving in his wake a cloud of dust.

The men rolled up their blankets and saddled their horses in feverish haste to be off on the trail. They urged their spiritless mounts forward and gazed ahead for further sight of their quarry.

They saw him again as they topped a butte. The phantom stood at its foot, a hundred yards away. Upon seeing them, he merely snorted his disgust and watched curiously. Stevens drew his rifle from its boot and threw it to his shoulder. As he laid his cheek upon the stock, Navajo spurred his horse forward and jerked the gun from the other's hands. "You don't try that in this outfit!"

The other's eyes shifted back and forth from the stallion to Harvey. "Why not?" he demanded. "I was just goin' tuh crease him."

Rand broke in. "What the hell?" he exploded, "who told yuh that *you* was boss o' this outfit?"

Navajo returned his stare coolly. "You can shout all you want to, but you don't either of you try creasing a wild horse if I can help it." He realized that he was one against two. In his left hand he still held Steven's rifle, useless at such short range, with speed of prime importance. His right hand rested just below the butt of his Colt. It was a clash of wills. Tense seconds passed, yet neither of the other two made a move for a gun. The

strain was removed when Black Satan loped away.

Creasing a horse was one method of capturing it. The bullet was aimed for the nape of the neck, and if it found its mark, would temporarily stun the animal. But aside from being cruel, the method was uncertain. A .30-30 bullet from a short barreled saddled rifle is not accurate with the best of shots. Should the bullet go low, the horse dies of a broken neck; should it go high, it means a complete miss.

The three men watched Black Satan moving across the desert. Rand turned to Navajo. "Well, Harvey, if you're so damned set on not creasin' the hoss, what method d'yuh suggest?" His tone was insolent and derisive.

Navajo gazed reflectively across the badlands. He pointed to two sandy hills connected by a narrow gulch. "Think you and Lew can drive the stallion into that pass?"

The other nodded.

"Good. I'll be at the other end to rope him."

Navajo stationed himself at the opposite mouth of the gulch, concealed from the view of anything passing between the hills. In his right hand he held the open loop of his lariat. The rope's end was secured to his saddle horn. He waited patiently for nearly half an hour, listening for the first sound that would tell him that Black Satan was in the gulch.

He was rewarded at last by the sound of unshod hoofs clattering on broken rock and shale. He tensed, and spoke a word to quiet his mount. The clatter of hoofs drew nearer, then the stallion appeared like a charging black monster.

Navajo tensed his muscles, and held his breath. The horse flew past him like the wind, and simultaneously, Navajo's lariat shot out. The loop of rope swooped close to the group, fell under the rear hoofs of the racing

horse, then was jerked back. The loop closed; the lariat tightened. Black Satan twisted sidewise, stumbled, then fell kicking, while Navajo continued to tug on his mount's reins, urging him back against the pull of the rope.

Stevens appeared through the gulch, followed by Rand. Both leaped from their saddles. Stevens rushed up to the fighting stallion, and knelt upon his head while Rand completed the job of hog-tying the captured animal. When they were finished, the stallion lay upon his side, heaving, all four legs tied together.

AT THE nearest waterhole, they rested for a day, then started on their return journey to the Triangle O. With them went Black Satan, loosely hobbled and with the nooses of two lariats about his neck, while directly behind, just out of range of his hoofs, Stevens rode, urging him forward. The stallion, his spirit unbroken, contested most of the way.

Thought of the reward awaiting them at the ranch brightened the dispositions of Rand and Stevens. Their thirst and fatigue were almost forgotten. With Harvey, it was different. As he watched the futile struggles of the wild stallion he had helped to make a prisoner, he felt a tinge of regret. He was sorry to think that this untamed thing would be broken—that the spirit that caused it to fight for its freedom would be curbed. When he had gone on the trail of Black Satan it was because of the lure of the chase for something almost unattainable, for with Navajo, it was always the unattainable which he desired.

They arrived at the ranch triumphant but tired, and riding horses that were ready to drop. But their captive was still unsubdued, bearing evidence of the Gargantuan efforts of the three who had followed and captured him, and brought him out of the badlands. Among those to greet them upon their return was Flo Olson, daughter

of the owner of the Triangle O. While the others congratulated the returning heroes, and looked upon their captive with wonder and admiration, she gazed with pitying eyes at the still defiant stallion. Rand turned in the saddle and gave her a leering grin. "Howdy," he saluted her. "Ain't yuh goin' tuh congratulate me?"

She turned her gaze upon him for a moment, eyeing him in angry silence, then turned away. The man's eyes continued to rest upon her. He licked his lips and fingered meditatively his stubble of beard. Navajo watched Rand with hostile eyes. He revered womanhood, and too, Flo was numbered first among those unattainable things he craved.

A short time later, the three men stood before Olson in the latter's office. He held out a check to each of them. Rand and Stevens snatched theirs with greedy fingers, but Harvey stared at the slip of paper Olson was holding out to him and shook his head. "Mr. Olson, how much do you figure Black Satan is worth?" he he asked.

The rancher pondered for a moment. "Why I don't know, Navajo, but he's a mighty good stallion."

"Will that check you're offering me cover it?"

The other shrugged. "Ordinarily, it wouldn't. But being as that black devil is such an ornery and unmanageable brute, I guess maybe it'll be enough."

"Then I'll take Black Satan off your hands," replied Harvey.

Olson looked at the cowpuncher curiously. "What d'you intend to do with him, Navajo?"

"Ride him."

The rancher grinned. "He'll take some riding."

When night had fallen, Harvey went to see how his newly acquired horse was faring. As he drew near the high board corral, he saw that someone was there ahead of him. It

proved to be Flo. Navajo could feel his heart flutter with gladness. She smiled at him. "I'm admiring your prize, Navajo," she said. "Dad told me you'd bought him."

He nodded. "I feel a little responsible for him. And I felt sort of sorry for Black Satan when I saw him in a noose. It didn't seem right, somehow—he was so wild and handsome."

He felt Flo's hand suddenly grip his arm, and turned; she looked up at him, her eyes pleading. "Phil," she said—and he realized that this was the first time she had addressed him by that name—"Phil, ride Black Satan if you must, but please *don't* break his spirit."

He looked down at her, admiration in his eyes. "I understand," he said softly. "Black Satan will never know spur nor quirt."

Days passed into weeks while Harvey carried on his task of acquiring mastery of his horse. By slow degrees, he got the big, black brute used to his presence by talking gently to him, feeding and watering him, stroking him, until Black Satan no longer fought when Harvey touched him. By slow degrees, he got the stallion used to halter, bridle, and after a battle and much patience, even a saddle.

MEANWHILE, Jess Rand was busy too. He continued to force his unwanted attentions upon Flo Olson, refusing to accept rebuke or insult. Flo hesitated to complain to her father, for no woman likes to admit that she is not capable of taking care of herself. Harvey saw, and longed to kick Rand out of the girl's way. All that held him back was the fear that she might resent his intrusion.

And often, Navajo noted the covetous eyes of Stevens watching the black stallion. On one occasion, he heard a commotion at the corrals and then the scream of a man in mortal fear. He ran to the pen where the wild horse was kept, and almost stumbled

over a body which came rolling from under the bars. A man, shaking with fright, got to his feet. It was Stevens. "Thet damned stud of yours tried to kill me," he shouted.

Harvey looked into the corral where Black Satan was still snorting and milling around. "What were you doing in there?" he demanded.

"Just lookin' your hoss over. They ain't no law against that, is there?"

"I guess not," admitted Navajo, frowning, "but hereafter, you'd better keep out of that animal's way."

Quite a sizable crowd which included everyone from the cook to the ranch owner gathered when Harvey first mounted the stallion. When all was in readiness for him to top his wild mount, Harvey stopped and unstrapped his spurs. "Riding him without spurs?" inquired one of the punchers.

"Sure am," Navajo admitted.

The stallion looked at the puncher who had spoken and gave him a wall-eyed stare. "Gosh!" the man ejaculated, "I wouldn't fork that stud-horse for a bagful uh gold eagles studded with diamonds."

Harvey mounted. For a moment, the stallion beneath him stood still, then like an uncoiled spring, he came into action. The corral was a bedlam of noise—the thump of hooves, equine grunts, creaking saddle leather, and the shouts of the spectators mingled in an endless din. Harvey rode like a burr. At last the efforts of the furious horse grew less violent. His black hide glistened with sweat, and rumps, shoulders, and neck were bathed in lather. Navajo motioned to one of the punchers who lowered the bars to the corral. Through the opening, the horse bolted and was away with his relentless rider atop him. Olson watched the figure of horse and rider as they receded in the distance. "Navajo's ridden the worst horse in Arizona," he said. "What a man!"

His daughter, standing beside him, agreed.

Nearly an hour later, horse and rider returned. Black Satan still held his head high though the man upon him had proved himself the master. The great horse had not known the ignominy of spur or quirt. The man had ridden but not baited him.

Rand and Stevens stood a little way off, watching, while Harvey unsaddled the horse, talking softly to him, and rubbing the figure down. Stevens turned to his companion; "I want that horse!" he stated.

The other looked toward the ranch house where Flo sat on the front veranda. "Mebbe it could be arranged," he replied grimly, "I'm wantin' somethin' too!"

The days that followed were, for Phil, full, for when his work was done, his time was spent in the company of his two favorites—Flo Olson and Black Satan. Flo came to watch him while he slowly turned the stallion from a vicious, surly animal to a fairly gentle and even affectionate pet. The time came when the great horse developed a fondness for his master. He learned to come running at a whistle, and to nose his master's hand for some luscious tid-bit which he often found there.

He learned to allow Flo to mount and ride him, and to stand patiently while she caressed his glossy, black hide. But to all others he was still an outlaw, dangerous and unmanageable.

Marveling at the transformation that had taken place in the animal's disposition, Flo told Navajo, "Some day, Black Satan will repay you, Phil. He'll make you thankful for your kindness."

Roundup time came, and the punchers packed their equipment and left the bunk house deserted. Harvey left Black Satan behind him at the corrals; it was not his intention to make a cow horse of his favorite

mount. Flo promised to see that he was cared for.

Long days of hard riding followed, and there was little time for rest. But when they sat around the campfire after the evening meals, Navajo noted that Rand and Stevens sat a little apart and talked in low voices. "They're hatching something," he thought. "They'll bear watching."

A FEW days after the roundup started, Olson joined his men with the intention of staying with them until the roundup was over. Harvey engineered a chance conversation with his employer, and during it, asked who remained at the ranch. "Flo and Chung Lee are there," Olson stated.

The puncher felt a trifle uneasy. He supposed Flo was safe and able to care for herself. But he could not shake off the feeling that she should not be left with only the old Chinese cook.

Then one morning, when the men rolled out of their blankets for the day's work, they discovered that Rand and Stevens were missing, and their horses gone. There were curiosity and conjectures as to what had become of them, but no one had any solution. Harvey felt a chill of dread steal over him. All along, he had sensed something evil in the attitudes of the two punchers, and now they had disappeared, and Flo was at the ranch house almost alone. He sought out Olson. "Boss, won't you let me return to the ranch and see if everything's all right?" he petitioned. "There's something queer about Rand and Stevens going away like this."

The other laughed at Harvey's uneasiness.

"Just the same," the puncher persisted, "it wouldn't do any harm for me to go see."

Olson shrugged. "Oh, very well," he acquiesced, "but don't be long; we need you here."

As Harvey neared the ranch buildings, he felt a nameless dread of disaster, and the silence that mantled the surroundings seemed foreboding. He passed the corral where Black Satan had been confined; it was empty. "Flo's probably out riding," he told himself, yet he knew that he did not believe that bit of reasoning. He dismounted and went to the house. There was no sign of life.

He entered the kitchen through the back door, and the first sight to meet his eyes was Chung Mee lying prone upon the floor. He knelt beside the prostrate figure and turned it over on its back. The Chinaman was dead, a bullet through his heart. Harvey felt no dismay—only a frantic fear. He called. His voice, ringing through the stillness of the house, drew no answer. He rushed through the rooms, all deserted. In the living room there were signs of a struggle; a chair overturned, the table pushed awry.

Out into the open he went, and to the corrals. His eyes, lit with a blaze of fury, took in all. Now he was the trailer, keen, alert. He saw where Black Satan had been saddled, not without a struggle. He examined the footprints in the dust. "They made Flo ride the stallion," was his verdict. "They knew neither of them could ride him—not without a fight, and they didn't have time for that." He saw that the tracks pointed southeast. He left a note near the body of Chung Lee, and mounting his horse, followed the trail, fury and murder in his heart.

All the instinct of the keen, observing trailer he exerted, pushing forward at a rapid pace. All day, he traveled grimly on, and when dusk came, dismounted, and until the last ray of light was gone, relentlessly trailed his prey and their captive. He came to the edge of the badlands, and realized that it would be difficult to follow the trail into these dry wastes.

But he had done it once before when he had followed Black Satan.

And far ahead of him, Rand and Stevens pushed forward on exhausted mounts with their captive riding Black Satan. Well they knew that their flight must be accomplished in haste. They were working toward the border, knowing that once on the Mexican side, they could free themselves of pursuers. The fear of being captured led them to deal more gently with their captive than they might otherwise have done; she would remain unmolested until they reached the safety of a hiding place in Mexico. Tired and fear ridden, they stopped at last at one of the few waterholes that the badlands contained, and made their camp.

At the first light of day, both camps were astir, but Harvey was the first to set forth. The trail became more difficult to follow, but upon discovering the general direction taken by the three, and knowing the situation of the waterholes where they must stop, he pushed on at increased speed.

It was noon of the third day on the trail that he saw his quarry in the distance where they had stopped for a noon-day meal and rest. A groan of relief was the only sound as he slid his revolver holster forward, and felt to see that his rifle was loose in its boot. Spurs urged to a run his tired mount.

Rand and Stevens saw him when he was still about four hundred yards away. With a curse, Rand leaped to his horse, and drew his rifle from the saddle sheath. He opened fire at the advancing rider. At the third shot, Harvey felt a blow in his left shoulder; he reeled, fumbled for the saddle horn, and then fell to the hot ground. His horse ran a short distance, then another bullet from Rand's rifle felled him. Again he directed his shots at Navajo who lay prone in the dust. The wounded man looked about him,

and seeing a shallow gulley, rolled into it and out of danger of the bullets. He tied up his shoulder as best he could, staunching the flow of blood; then he drew his Colt and returned his enemy's fire. But the distance was too far for the sidearm to be effective.

TWICE he emptied the cylinders of his revolver. One bullet struck Stevens' horse, and it went down. Harvey groaned at the futility of his shots. His Winchester was in the saddle sheath out where his horse lay dead. He attempted to crawl to it, but bullets from the rifles of the other two sent him rolling back into the gulley. He saw them watching, rifles ready. In his left hand, Rand held the bridle reins of his own horse and of Black Satan. On the back of the latter sat Flo, and Harvey knew that to risk more shots with his revolver might endanger her.

The two men held a confab, then Phil saw Stevens remove his rifle sheath from the saddle of his dead horse, and tie it on Black Satan's. Rand mounted his horse, and made the girl climb up before him. Stevens, then, would attempt to ride the stallion. Doubtless, reasoned Harvey, the days of hard riding had somewhat tamed the animal, and though he might pitch half-heartedly, Stevens, who was a fairly decent rider, would be able to stay on. Harvey swore. So they were going to leave him, wounded and without a horse, to die a slow death in that waterless heat. But worst of all, they were making good their escape with Flo.

Stevens mounted the stallion. Then, staggering to his feet, Navajo gave a shrill whistle. The great black horse swung around; Stevens, with an oath, jerked at the reins and raked the animal's flanks with his spurs. It was the first time that the horse had suffered such treatment; gone suddenly was the docility that long days of toil had

partially taught him—he was an outlaw once more.

With a scream of fury he reared, his heavy hoofs flaying the air. Harvey whistled again—the whistle he had taught the stallion to know as a summons. Dust shrouded the forms of horse and rider, but equine screams and human shouts rang out loudly. Then out of the haze of dust was flung the figure of a man. After it leaped the infuriated stallion, striking out with fore-hoofs. Stevens tried to crawl away, then the animal was upon him. Rand drew his six-gun to save his companion, but Flo entered into the fight, clawing, biting, scratching at the man in the saddle before her.

Harvey whistled a third time. The stallion turned from the twisted, inert form that had been Stevens, and galloped toward the swaying figure he recognized as his master. "Satan," gasped Harvey as the animal raced up to him, "you black devil, I knew you'd stick by me, pal."

As Harvey leaped astride the back of his new mount, Rand managed to push the still fighting girl from the saddle. He let fly a few random shots in Harvey's direction, then spurred his mount to flight. Navajo urged Black Satan forward, and the stallion seemed to fly over the ground. The

distance between pursued and pursuer rapidly diminished and the two exchanged pistol shots from the backs of their racing horses.

But now the advantage was with Harvey; he rode a faster horse, and he did not have to turn in the saddle to shoot. "It's your turn to get yours!" Harvey screamed at Rand. "Take your medicine." He fired again, and Rand reeled in the saddle and fell to earth. Harvey rode after the riderless horse, and caught its reins. When he dismounted beside Rand, the man was dead.

At the nearest waterhole on the back trail, Flo bathed his wound. Then she put her hand tenderly on Navajo's arm. "Phil," she said softly, "you've done the greatest thing that it is within the power of man to do for woman—you risked your life for my sake. How can I ever reward you?"

"I want the biggest reward of all, Flo, dear," Navajo whispered.

Her eyes shone. "What man would I rather have for a husband!"

As they rode out of the desert, Harvey leaned forward and patted Black Satan's glossy, ebony, neck. "You've helped to bring me happiness, old boy," he said. "I wonder how I can repay you?"

PLUNDER TRAIL

By WESTMORELAND GRAY

*Crashing six-guns and blazing automatics
burn a trail from the T Cross R to hell*

Another feature story for the December
Golden West . . On sale about Nov. 5th

Headin' fer Hades

By WILLIAM H. STUEBER

Luke Orman, got gun-play aplenty on his twenty-first birthday

WHO? That there young squirt with the face looking somewhat like an apple pie that's been plumb neglected? Why that's Luke Orman, the most peaceful, regrettin'est hombre in these parts!

How come he tuh be so sour lookin'? Stranger, there's ample reason. Yuh see, Luke's recently had the *pleasure* o' gulpin' a heapin' ladle o' sure enough bad medicine. Make yorself comfortable an' I'll tell yuh what happened when Luke opined that bein' twenty-one years ole makes a boy a man.

Yuh see, three weeks ago come Thursday, Luke lays claim tuh havin' arrived at the grand ole age o' twenty-one. Now the Wednesday night previous wa'n't a heap different than he'd always been—twice as thin an' twice as peaceful as a young squirt should be. But early Thursday mornin'? Hell's bells! He come awaddlin' down Main Street, a brand new six-gun danglin' at each hip an' the orneriest look in his blue eyes I ever did see.

Me, bein' right new tuh this here Sheriff business an' yet knowin' enough about it tuh reckon that ornery eyes an' new six-guns spell trouble with all capital letters, goes tuh meet him. Stranger, I'm not stretchin' truth an inch when I tell yuh that Luke's breath was so danged whiskeyfied it tarnished my badge—almost.

"Howdy, Luke," I says an' screwed my face tuh one side so's tuh be certain o' some air that wa'n't more'n

half alcohol, "What cussed country has gone an' declared war on us now?"

Luke reckons the question is worth the same sorta look a polecat gives a buzzard who has jest flown 'way with the makin's of a fine meal. He gives me jest such a look an' by way o' good measure adds a laugh nicely jackassish.

Says he, "There ain't no war *yet*. These here six-guns ain't fer other than a private ruckus an' if I elect tuh have such, it ain't no affair of yore's!"

"H'm! When I see a man sportin' two guns where he never sported any, I'm powerful interested," I declares, "An' when I see a boy who ain't touched a drop before powerfully lickered, I'm twice that way. Now . . ."

"I had more tuh say, but Luke, havin' mislaid all his former peacefulness, cut me short with a red-hot," "I said there ain't no war *yet*. There will be, *an' pronto*, if the jaspers hereabouts don't reckon tuh treat me like a man. I'm twenty-one today. I ain't no longer a boy. I'm an honest tuh goodness man. A man, savvy? An' I aim tuh be treated as such. Fer 'most fifteen years folks has said I can't do this, that an' t'other 'count I wa'n't o' legal age. From now on I does as pleases *me* an' the first cuss tuh say me no will find Hell apopin' close tuh home'!"

I looked at my watch. Quarter tuh nine. I looked square intuh Luke's eyes—the sections visible through the whiskey haze, I mean.

"You ain't o' legal age yet, Luke," I informs him, "Yuh got fifteen minutes tuh go. Yuh was born at sharp nine o'clock an'"

"Then I'll wait fifteen minutes on the doorstep of the Nugget Saloon!"

That riles me. "How come yuh opine that guzzlin' firewater an' sportin' six-guns makes a man? Now yuh take my advice an' steer clear o' the Nugget. No good'll come o' yore bein' there, Savvy?"

Ever see a rattlesnake coiled an' puffed with anger? Well Luke puffed jest like that. Only more so.

"Damnation tuh you an' yore advice. Advice! Fer long's I can recollect I've had advice crammed intuh me. Took time tuh do it, but danged if I ain't plumb overflowin' at last. The next man as gives me advice will sure enough have the regrettin'est regrets yuh ever heard tell of. Now step one side, Mr. Sheriff. I aim tuh begin bein' a man on the tick o' the clock. One side!"

Now don't you get tuh thinkin' I hadn't plenty itchin' tuh pick up the ninety odd pounds o' Luke Orman, flip him across my knee an' whale his sittin' down sections. Twenty-one, or no I sure had tuh pull leather an' hold fast.

I favored him with a downright nasty look an' let him go, callin' over my shoulder, "Go on then! Lap up yore poison. Get mixed up in any ruckus as suits yuh. But damned if yuh hadn't best watch out that neither leads tuh blood shed. If they do, yuh'll find me after you swifter'n a plumb starved coyote chases a fat stray calf. If need be, I'll make yuh the honored guest at a rope party right swifter. That ain't advice, either!"

Did Luke hear me? Yep! I know he did cause I onct out-hollered ole Zeke Brann, the hollerin'est hollerer since hollerin' was invented. Did Luke stop an' think about my say-so? Not by a darn!

LAST I saw o' Luke that mornin', he's almost at the Nugget door. He would've *been there*, only it seems that there was some sorta misunderstandingin' 'tween his feet. One foot aimin' tuh carry him East; t'other electin' tuh go West. A sorta tug o' war that made Luke's walkin' no better than the usual cusses who's shipped an overload o' powerful drinkin'.

Yep! That was all I saw o' Luke that mornin', but come dark I sure enough heard heaps I hadn't seen. 'Pears that Luke kept his word about waitin' 'till he was exactly twenty-one 'fore enterin' the Nugget. At nine sharp he waddles up tuh the bar an' howls fer the best drink in the house that's suitable fer a man o' his size an' calibre.

Ole Gus—barkeep in the Nugget—bein' one o' those galoots as take their barkeepin' danged serious like an' always aim tuh fill an order both pronto an' tuh the dot, looks Luke over powerfully careful. Then he draws him a tumbler full o' *water*.

"That there is jest what the doctor orders fer men o' yore size, calibre an' *condition*," says Gus.

Did yuh ever have dealin's with a mule? No? Then yuh don't know that they're somewhat like the weather—yuh can expect *anything* next. Sometimes yuh can dig a mule with spurs or rake his rump with a rawhide whip an' that there mule will posalutely refuse tuh move. Next minute yuh can jest playfully thump him in the ribs with yore thumb an' hell will sure pop. Now tuh Luke, that glass o' water was 'xactly like a thumb thump tuh a mule who's in no mood fer abuse howsomever gentle nor well meant.

Luke picks up the glass with a snort about a man's drink, flings glass an' all plumb intuh Gus's face. Tuh prove his say-so that he's now a man, Luke lets loose a stream o' sizzlin' words that blistered the paint on the bar—almost. Mind yuh, that paint had

withstood some high powered licker without blisterin'.

Now Gus has a mind that works right fast on occasions—of which this was one. He arrives at the conclusion that his face ain't made fer catchin' glasses. He ducks quicker'n he did the time Killer Marby an' his band o' thievin' cusses paid a strictly business visit tuh the Nugget. The glass sails over his head an' makes a heap o' small mirrors out o' the one big one which the 'riginal owner o' the Nugget dragged clear from the East at a pretty penny o' cost.

"I want a man's drink!" roars Luke—an' means it, "A man's drink an' pronto!"

Gus bein' entirely too prosperous tuh risk a sudden departin' fer other worlds, plants two bottles an' a big tumbler 'fore *the man*. Contents? Well, mules are posalutely kickless when compared tuh that licker. Luke couldn't see the glass. He swigs his drinks plumb out o' the bottle. Damned if he didn't drain the last drop out o' the first an' get ornerier with each swig. The cork o' the second provin' somewhat mulish, Luke busts the neck off the bottle.

Seein' the jagged edge goin' tuh Luke's lips an' bein' right interested in the health o' his customers, Gus shoves the glass closer tuh Luke.

"Mister," says he, "I'd advise yuh"

Hell's bells! Advice again! Luke was within an inch of explodin'.

"You advise!" he yells an' snatches his six-guns from the bar.

Then he sprays lead about the Nugget with plumb disregard fer man or property. Gus caught a bit o' the lead in the right shoulder. Balson, the gambler, got his bit in the thigh an' Bill Sanley—top hand over tuh the Bar Z. Y. ranch—could have saved himself a heap o' discomfort by step-pin' one side, which is 'xactly what he didn't do. Result was that his skare

of the lead nigh ampu—amerta—well, cut off his little toe.

I forgot tuh tell yuh as how Luke never did anything by halves. Not on this occasion either! Guns empty an' plumb disappointed at the damage, he grabs himself a chair an' proceeds tuh make kindlin' wood out o' what's whole. When he runs out o' wind an' strength, ole Gus has enough firewood fer years tuh come an' the Nugget 'pears tuh have been visited by a destroyer angel an' nineteen or twenty assistant destroyers. Yep! Luke Orman proved himself a man—a damned expensive one!

What's that? Where was I while all this Hell an' tarnation was goin' on? Why I was out in the hills searchin' fer hide or hair o' Badlands Bardon, as ornery a cuss as ever hightailed from County tuh County murderin' an' thievin' as an' when it pleased him. I had a note from Sheriff Doyle o' Cayuga County declarin' that he'd chased Badlands intuh my County—which is Doyle's notion o' doin' me considerable of a favor. Anyhow, it was dusk when I reached home an' found my parlor lookin' sure like a regular sawbones' office.

Ole Gus hopped on me 'fore I could inquire as tuh the wherefore an' whyfore o' all the bandages. He informs me of events an' he sure 'pears hot enough to heat a flock o' brandin' irons.

There was a strong odor o' beef an' onions driftin' from the kitchen an' I reckoned the Missus would sure raise a ruckus if I went ridin' without supperin'. I was thinkin' about a fair season fer delay. Ole Gus, never havin' eaten of the Missus' beef an' onions, favors me with a vinegar look.

"Well? What yuh waitin' fer?" he explodes, "Why don't yuh get after him? I told yuh he was headin' fer an' seen in the Badlands. Yuh'd best get tuh ridin'—an' ridin' hard."

I did—after I'd had my fill o' cookin' as is, an' jest tuh prove I can get

a mite mulish when driven too hard, I chewed each mouthful an extra chew.

IT WAS real dark an' some chilly when I kisses the Missus good-bye. Hunt a man in the badlands in the dark? Betcha boots stranger, betcha boots! Never was a better time 'count the biting winds that generally howl at night. I knew that Luke, bein' jest twenty-one an' new tuh the business o' hidin' from Sheriff's, would do what a regular ole hand at the game would reckon as bein' pure suicide—he'd build him a nice warm fire. An' from the brow o' Death Mountain that fire would give me his address.

Ole Ned—the best pinto in the County—carried me some eleven o' the thirteen miles tuh Death Mountain. Then he stops as if he knew I'd pull him up short soon's that odor o' smoulderin' wood reached this nose o' mine. Ned always did smell interestin' things first.

Jest fer safety's sake I fingers my six-gun an' uses my nose right hard. Some minutes o' goin' left, right, backward an' forward an' then I arrives at what's left of a camp fire. Luke's! How'd I know? Well, true tuh tell, I guessed. Guessed that no man of experience in hidin' from the law would use chunks o' wood about four foot long nor depart without makin' danged certain the fire was out. The smouldering ends of those chunks were perfumin' the air as any old timer would know they would.

We leave that dead fire. Ned makes crackin' time tuh the brow o' Death Mountain an' I strain my eyes on the miles an' miles o' pitch black far below. There it was! No bigger'n the light of a fire-fly. We came away after a good look-see. Made better time comin' down, too. An' whilst doin' the downin', I'm figgerin' my next move.

Is Luke sobered enough tuh listen tuh reason an' common sense? Or is he still chuck full o' fight? If I get

close enough tuh call on him tuh surrender, will he do so right peaceful like or will he blaze away at me?

Two hundred yards from the flickerin' fire now. Six-gun in hand an' lips all primed fer yellin'. Gettin' closer an' closer tuh the showdown. Then, like the lummoX I've always been, I boot a stone.

Ever hear a cannon boom? That stone bangin' against a second one sounded likewise. That figger huddled at the fire side comes tuh its feet like a jumpin' jack. It gets away from the fireside quicker'n snow melts on a sizzlin' stove. It's lost in the blackness beyond the fire in less'n a jiffy—an' I'm hopin' that my dash back loses me tuh his eyes jest as completely.

Looked like it did. He couldn't see me; I couldn't see him! But I sure enough could hear him. He was gallivantin' some where off there in the inky black o' night.

I rushed after those sounds of boots on stones, yellin' as I went, "if yuh aim tuh live long, stop that hightailin' sudden like!"

That yellin' seemed made tuh order. It was a dead give away as tuh my location. Seemed as if the six-gun that spit fire an' lead was jest about under my nose. Stranger, there's a feelin' as is a feelin'! A six-gun apoppin' under my nose.

Now such conduct 'most generally riles me. It did *now*. I snatched ole forty-four and blazed away. H'm! I'm tellin' yuh that it jest seemed tuh make that other gun bark quicker. Wham! A chunk o' red-hot lead catches me in the forearm. Another chunk bites intuh my chest. A heap o' things must have happened—danged if I know what. Last I *did* know I could feel my head athumping on stone an' dirt. Teh whole world was spinnin' an' goin' loco completely.

How long I lay there I never will know. I recollect openin' my eyes some time late. It was still as dark as Hades is supposed tuh be when the

fires go out—if ever. I felt like some hundred more or less long-horns had been stampedin' with my a layin' under the hoofs of every danged one of 'em. I get tuh my feet an' whistle.

Ole Ned comes atrottin'. "Stay there, ole man," says I, "No sense tuh chasin' Luke an inch further without a six-gun."

I struck a match. Another one. More. The last one. An' always crawling on the ground. I jest had tuh give up then. The six-gun wa'n't there.

It was a long, slow, dangerous ride back tuh the stream I recollected ole Ned wadin'. I did what little doctorin' I could, an' then, plumb tuckered out, I slap ole Ned on the rump an' inform him, "No sense tuh breakin' our neck ridin' tonight. Go find yoreself some grass. Here we stay 'till dawn."

It comes an' finds me stiffenin' pertly. Good ole Ned's close at hand. I swing intuh the saddle and we start fer home—an' a fresh six-gun. We go up Death Mountain again. The sun's bustin' over the hills. I'm takin' a last look down there below, kinda hopin' tuh spot friend Luke's hideaway so's I can steer a straight course when I'm carryin' fire pieces.

There's a tiny spec down there in a wash-out an' it ain't no bigger'n an ant. Ah! Luke Orman—an' afoot! I waste a full minute with calcerlatin' Maybe the night's rest has sobered Luke? Maybe he's peaceful now?

"We'll try him again!" says I out loud.

Ned gets tuh reasoning that the sooner the job's finished, the sooner he'll be home chawin' oats. He goes Hell-bent down the steep sides o' Death Mountain. Across the first mesa gallops Ned. He dips intuh a washout, races on a mite further. Here's a mess o' footprints, fresh an' plain alaughin' at us. I slow Ned down an' watched careful. Hell's bells! There's my six-gun! An' there's the sure enough signs o' me draggin' my fool carcass away from it. Everything was as plain as

daylight tuh me now. I must've been half conscious an' crawlin' away from danger at the same time.

STRANGER, that six-gun never looked half as good tuh me in all the eight years I totted it. Snatched it from the sand, wheeled ole Ned around and started after Mister Luke Orman again. In jig time we're within eye range o' that ant. He's jest scamperin' tuh the beak o' Boar's Head Mountain.

I leave the saddle 'count the stiff grade an' I'm jest 'bout halfway up that jagged an' lickin' my chops as if Luke was already hogtied. Stopped dead. Not 'cause I was out o' puffs, but 'cause Luke was plainly a heap interested in my climbin'. Maybe he objected tuh it. But he certainly hadn't any neverminds 'bout drillin' a hole plumb through a Stetson that cost me all o' eighteen dollars!

"I won't be taken alive, damn you!" he yells from on top an' calcerlates tuh impress his words by sending a chunk o' lead so close tuh my cheek that I ain't had occasion tuh shave that spot tuh this day, "I warned yuh *last night* I wouldn't be taken alive!"

The gall o' the young squirt! He *warned* me! Jest when some ornery words were tumbling off the tip o' my tongue, I shut up. I recollected that Badlands Bardon was likewise loose in these hills! Now I knew *everything*. Those two had exchanged lead, each thinkin' the other was more'n likely a deputy o' mine! Now what I wanted tuh know was which of 'em had peppered me in the dark of last night? Savvy?

Luke puts an end tuh my tryin' tuh figger things out. He blazes away at me again.

I do some darned fancy footwork, some better eye work an' some best brain work. Result? Why I skirted down an' in front o' him. Then, he bein' so all-fired anxious tuh reach level ground, he never notices me hid-

ing down where it'll do me most good.

Why didn't I drill him an' have finished with the ornery job? Well, stranger, drillin' a real tough hombre is plumb satisfyin' an' pleasant, but drillin' a whiskey soaked kid lacks all that. I aimed tuh take him alive at any price.

He comes at last. I hop from behind the rock an' dig my six-gun in his back.

"Jig's up, Luke," says I, "See how close yuh can come tuh touchin' that there sun."

"Dont' take me back tuh town, Sheriff, please don't take me back there. I won't have a ghost of a chance—they'll string me up."

"Shut up!" I snapped, "Ain't yuh had due warnin' what would happen? Didn't I tell yuh it was bad medicine tuh mosey 'round the Nugget?"

"Yes—yes. But I didn't mean tuh kill him. I didn't mean tuh"

"You ain't killed nobody, an' nobody's stringin' you up—'cept *me*!"

"I did kill him! I saw him. He's dead. He was trailin' me. I tried tuh shake him. No go. He beats it in front o' me. I offer tuh surrender. He laughs at me an' pegs lead at me. He promises tuh plant me right where I'm standin', allowin' that dead men don't do no gabbin'. We each shot. He fell. . . ."

"When was this?" I ask.

"Long 'bout dusk. Then"

"Quit yore bawlin', yuh overgrown calf!" I order, "Get tuh movin' back tuh that corpse. An' if there's cards up yore sleeve, so help me Hannah I'll shoot the spots off 'em be they aces or tens. Move!"

"I swear I didn't mean tuh kill him"

"Move, darn yuh, move!" says I.

He did. Led me a pretty scramble too. Then we came tuh the corpse Face down an' with buzzards hard at work on the back already. I turned it face up. Badlands Bardon! Five thousand on his head.

"I didn't mean tuh kill him! I thought he was settin' tuh take me back an' I"

It was gettin' on my nerves, this whimperin'. I allow that I was growlin' some as I climbed the steep side o' the wash-out. Once I reached the top I knew Luke hadn't killed Badlands by a long shot. There were Badlands' tracks from the fire side. There's where *my* lead caught him in the back. There was where I went down in a heap. There's where Badlands died an' fell intuh the wash-out. But no sense tuh spoilin' Luke by tellin' him.

"Well, bucko," says I right sourly, "Yuh've had yore dance an' now yuh'll pay fer the fiddlin'. Back tuh town yuh go. Not only do yuh lose the five thousand offered fer this man dead or alive—but more'n likely yuh'll jig at the end o' rope fer shootin' up the Nugget. That last depends on how folks interested feel. If they opine yuh should swing, swing yuh will—an' pronto."

Well, we get back tuh town an' I lock Luke up in my pokey. Then I do considerable chasin' round town an' spread the news. Those gents Luke filled with lead was willin' tuh forget—fer a sum. Ole Gus was likewise inclined if paid fer the damages tuh the Nugget. I open the door o' my pokey, kick Luke Orman in the sittin' down sections an' warn him that the first time I ever catch him totin' a six-gun, I'll sure enough hang him. Likewise will happen if I ever catch him near the Nugget or drink more powerful than water.

Luke's been right peaceful ever since. He never did find out that he couldn't very well have lost five thousand dollars because he never had earned it in the first place. He still labors under the impression that that one turn at playin' he was *a man* cost him five thousand dollars. I sure hope he keeps a laborin' so.

His Only Chance

By SHAUN MCGREAVY

The lone sheriff gets the bank bandits

SHERIFF Jim Victory pressed the telephone receiver more closely to his ear and listened in amazement to the words that were coming to him over thirty miles of desert and mountains. "Why blast it; I've never heard tell of sech a thing!" he blurted.

"Well, it's just that way!" It was the owner of the Granite City bank who was talking, and his voice came in hurried, excited gasps. "The bank here has been robbed of nearly twenty thousand dollars. Six men did it. They killed the cashier and wounded the town marshal. They are coming out your way now in a high-powered car. Get some men together and try to beat them to the cross-roads. You can't tell if they are heading for Slate Mountains or will take the desert road straight to Yucca. But by all means *stop them*—"

"*Brr brr br—*" a long silence came then while the sheriff jiggled the hook and tried to coax the telephone into life again.

"Humph, somebody must have climbed up a pole and cut the wire," the sheriff snorted. Dropping the silent receiver back on its hook, Jim Victory hurried out of the tin-roofed general store at Moneta.

This lone store was all there was of Moneta, but up to now it had been enough. Inside in one corner was a walled-off place where the proprietor sold stamps and collected and distributed what little mail there was to be handled. Jose Moneta, the old

Mexican who owned the place lived upstairs over the store, and also kept a couple of spare rooms ready for occasional over-night parties whose automobiles had broken down. Outside, facing the road on one side of the store, was a small building containing oil and gasoline to supply the needs of passing tourists.

The store also had the only telephone between Granite City, thirty miles away on the East, and Red Boulder, which was twenty-one miles over the mountains farther West. The only excuse for a store being there in that rugged broken country at all was that passing tourists, and cowboys from the scattered ranches, spent enough money at it to make it pay—which was reason enough for Moneta.

It was easy to see that the sheriff was worried now, badly worried. He stood on the store porch and scratched his grizzled chin thoughtfully; then gazed up and down the road which looped and curved away in the distance, disappearing between the ridges of nearby hills. Anxious little furrows of thought came and went on his wrinkled, rust-red face.

Swiftly his keen old eyes swept the broken rim of the horizon and again searched up and down the rapidly darkening road. At his back Slate Mountains rose in vast gloomy outlines, and before him lay thirty miles of broken, hog back hills and valleys. Following these valleys, twisting, turning and looping to take advan-

tage of the open canyons, was the new road to Granite City. In places the road curved like the shape of a letter S, and often after a wide swing it would return so near to its neighboring loop that a man could have thrown a stone across into the road below. At other places it would swing back for a mile or two in the direction it came from in order to take advantage of a gap in the hills or to avoid a bad canyon.

The sheriff knew that somewhere along this new road the car of bank robbers was speeding toward him. He also knew that his chance of stopping them was mighty slim. "It's plumb hell, that's what it is," he burst out finally. "And what I want to know," he went on to himself, "is what in the name of gosh is a man t' do?" Turning about then the sheriff's gaze settled on his battered Ford roadster.

Inside the store, Moneta stopped for a moment at his task of lighting the single coal-oil lamp which swung overhead by means of a horse hair lariat passed through a ring in the ceiling. Cocking his ear to one side he listened to the sheriff who stood on the porch muttering to himself. Hurriedly the storekeeper finished his task of lighting the wick. Replacing the smoked globe of the lamp chimney over the flame, Moneta went behind the counter and pulling on the end of the lariat, he yanked the light to its place.

Suddenly then the Mexican's short fat outlines appeared framed in the doorway in the oblong glow of orange light spread by the lamp. Never in the many years he had known Jim Victory had he heard the sheriff mutter to himself, and the sound disturbed the old storekeeper. "*Que pasa*—what passes?" inquired Moneta now, as he recognized the form of the sheriff on the porch.

"Hell passes," rasped the sheriff irritably. "At least it's sure going to pass if somebody don't stop it. And

there don't appear to be no crowd of candidates.

"See here, Moneta," the sheriff continued, "there's been a big hold-up at Granite City. I just got the message over the telephone. The Granite City Bank has been robbed. Six men were in the hold-up; they killed the cashier and put a couple of bullets in the town marshal when he tried to stop them—so that puts him out of it. And they are headed out this way on the new road right now. I wish they had taken the old road—it would have been slower. Very likely," the sheriff continued quickly, "they are heading for Slate Mountains, and from there will work up through the Pass to Red Boulder. If that's the case they will pass by the store here. They are just as likely though to keep on to the desert and head straight across to Yucca—there's no way of telling.

"But even if they cut straight across for Yucca they will have to come up the new county road to Twin Trails anyway, and that's just six miles from here. And," went on the sheriff, "the bank owner over at Granite City wants me to get a posse together and rush down to the cross roads and head them off. That's all! Just get a group of men together and get down to the cross roads in time to capture six desperadoes traveling in a high-powered machine. Why," the sheriff ended with a snort, "there ain't another man besides you and me between here and Hud Griffeth's ranch. And you are almost a cripple, and the ranch is fifteen miles away—the wrong way at that."

"What you goin' do about eet?" Moneta asked as he gazed fearfully off down the road towards Twin Trails.

"Do? What is there to do," snapped the sheriff. "So far as I can see I've got to rush off down that way and try and stop them myself, that is unless you want to go along with me?"

THE old Mexican stared at the sheriff, alarm showing in every line of his face. He had no intention of going on a chase as crazy as Jim Victory's plan suggested. And Moneta had ways of his own of getting out of things. Quickly his look of alarm changed to an expression of blankness. Shrugging his shoulders helplessly he turned a puzzled, wooden face to the sheriff. "No sé! No unnerstan Englis! I speek leetle, but no unnerstan talk."

Jim Victory had expected some such reply and didn't wait to hear more. Suddenly, his mind made up, he galvanized into rapid and wiry action.

With swift strides his lean legs crossed the road to where his car was parked. Swinging himself quickly into the seat, he kicked the self starter and headed off in the direction of Granite City and the cross-roads.

Two minutes later the rattly little roadster was only a gray blur against the rim of the skyline.

Moneta watched the sheriff disappear in the distance and a look of great amazement came over his face as he realized that old Jim Victory was going off alone in his Ford roadster to try to capture half a dozen bandits who had a high-powered car. Moneta uttered just one word concerning such actions. "*Demente*—insane!" he said and limped quickly inside. Putting out the lamp, he started closing the store. Moneta intended to hide somewhere until the bandits had either been captured or had passed.

The sheriff, opening the car up for all it would do, was soon at the beginning of where the new county road began. The old road lay about a mile above, almost parallel to the new one, and separated from the new road by a series of hog-back foothills which ran between the level desert country and the mountains. Since the new county highway had been opened to traffic, the old road was never used

any more except by the few ranchers who had settled along it when it was the main highway between Granite City and Red Boulder. Even these ranchers who lived along the old highway, however, cut through to the new road when they reached a point opposite to where it began.

Skidding to a pause in a cloud of rock dust the sheriff stopped the motor, leaped from the car and standing in the road, listened attentively for nearly a minute. Then he hurried over and studied the marks which led away at right angles from the new road. A regular trail had been made. In the darkness the sheriff could see wagon tracks, hoof marks and even the tire treads of an occasional automobile where the ranchers living along the old road had been cutting back and forth between the roads.

The sheriff had a plan in mind now and he set rapidly to work. Hurrying about in the darkness he tussled busily with some old boards that had been left on the roadside by the construction men who put the new road through. Dragging the boards across the main highway he made a sort of flimsy barricade; then he secured an old sign and propped it up in the center of the road. This finished, he hurried back to his machine and scrambling quickly in sped off down the new road toward Granite City.

It was now a matter of less than two miles to the main road fork of Twin Trails. This cross road was the really important divide which on the automobile road maps of San Carlos county shows one road rising into the winding valley that circles up past Moneta and over Slate Mountains to Red Boulder and shows the other road leading straight ahead over many miles of greasewood and cactus covered desert country to Yucca, the next town.

Speeding swiftly for this cross road the sheriff was still a matter of half a dozen city blocks from the

dividing point of the highways, when far down the road he saw the blue-white glare of a swiftly moving automobile's headlights.

Traveling along the new road with reckless disregard of any speed regulations, the powerful shafts of light straightened out and blazed in the face of the sheriff. "Humph, looks like I'm a goin' tuh lose," the sheriff grunted. Gauging the distance of the two cars from the cross roads, the sheriff saw that he would barely reach the fork before the other car, if at all. But his face set in grim, tense lines and he kept straight on down the center of the road. Like a long black cylinder, the big car rushed out of the night and bore down upon him. Its oncoming searchlights played fully and cruelly on the little battered roadster and on the strained weather-beaten face of the sheriff. Still he held the car in the road!

THE sheriff was only a matter of a few feet from the crossing when suddenly he appeared to lose his grip on the steering wheel. The little car lurched drunkenly, skidded crazily to the roadside and brought up with a bang against a square, white-painted post by the road forks.

The post broke short off just above the ground, spun several feet through the air and landed by the highway with a thud.

The two wooden arms on top of the post lay with their black painted direction hands pointing straight up in the air when the big car careened alongside. For a moment it seemed as if it would rush past—then with a grinding growl from straining mechanism, the long machine shuddered, the brakes bit into the lining and the car skidded to a standstill.

The sheriff sat in his battered Ford and blinked owlishly through its splintered windshield at the other car.

But there was no lack of action in

the newcomers. The driver, a thick set fellow with a cap and goggles, stared stonily at the sheriff. He kept his hands on the steering wheel of the car, but his beetled brows, narrow-slitted eyes and tight mouth showed the face of a killer rather than a chauffeur. And from the hands of the other five strangers the sheriff saw the bulky shapes of five black automatics pointing toward him. He knew death was staring at him there; yet he did not speak. He was thinking. His thoughts were that for once he was glad that his five pointed star which marked him for an officer was not showing.

Suddenly one of the occupants of the big car rasped out a question in a voice that was hoarse with anger. "What's the idea of knocking down that sign post, old man? Where do you think you're going, you old fool? Why I've got a notion to put a bullet through you I—" The speaker broke off in a stream of curses.

A man who sat next to the one who was doing the talking, and who did not appear to want his voice heard, nudged the speaker. They whispered together for a moment. Then the first man went on in a more polite tone of voice. "What's the matter old man, couldn't you see where you were going—what's the idea of taking up all the road?"

"No," the sheriff spoke for the first time, "your lights blinded me; I couldn't seem to see anything at all but that sign post."

"Aw, hell, that's all right," the spokesman of the big car replied. "We ain't mad if you ain't, and," he went on, again losing his temper, "it wouldn't do you but damn little good if you were. But now that you knocked down that post you'll have to tell us the road to Slate Mountains. We're a bunch of tourists, see, and are on our way farther west. I think it will be healthier for us than these parts," he continued with a sneering

laugh. "So you'll have to tell us which is the road to the pass. And if you make a mistake, old man," the other's voice rose shrilly, "why by the Lord it'll be the last one you ever make. Quick now, which is the road to Slate Mountains?"

"That way," the sheriff pointed. "Down the same way I come from."

"All right, we'll try it," the speaker said, "but mind now, if you're lying we'll meet again—*get me!*" Without another word then the bandit reached forward and motioned for the driver to go ahead.

Quickly gathering speed the long dark car roared away into the darkness.

THE minute the car was out of sight the sheriff again got busy. First he stood up slowly to test himself for broken bones. Finding none, he once more tried the self starter of the car. The engine sputtered a time or two and then settled down to as steady a hum as it had had before the car hit the post.

"She's still fit as a fiddle," grinned the sheriff as he backed the car out in the road again.

Then stepping on the gas for all it was worth the sheriff headed straight on for Granite City—a direction at right angles to the road on which the big car had disappeared.

Thirty seven minutes later the sheriff drew up before the two-story red brick bank at Granite City. He was at once surrounded by a group of hatless and excited men. A posse of citizens were forming and guns bristled from the crowd. They plied the sheriff with questions, exclamations and growls of rage. "What are you doing here," someone gibed, "did you think the crooks would still be a standing here waiting for you?"

"How did you git past them?" another called, "they left here on the same road you come in on, and not over forty minutes ago? How in Top-

het did you git past them—take to the greasewood till they passed?"

Swiftly the sheriff held up his hand for silence. "Get your guns and put out all the lights in the town that show up along the old county road. Then put a bunch of rocks or an old car across the road and scatter out along each side of the road out at the edge of town—pronto—quick, there's no time to lose," he snapped.

Although half of the men secretly believed him crazy, the sheriff's voice carried authority and they rushed at once to comply with his commands.

They were barely in time. The word had hardly been given, the lights extinguished and the posse assembled and posted, when the blue-white glare of an automobile's headlights were seen approaching over the old county road. The car slackened speed as it came into view of the bank owner's own machine which he had driven across the road as a barricade. Quickly it bore down on the vacant automobile, then scenting a trap, the big car swerved and made an effort to turn.

But at that moment a dozen red spurts of fire leaped from the guns of the men concealed along the roadside. The bullets were aimed at the tires and the long car shivered like a live thing, the air from the punctured tires whining shrilly as it escaped from many bullet punctures.

The voice of the sheriff cut the silence like a knife then. "Hands up, you men in the car—all of you! You're surrounded. Stand up—drop your pistols and get out and line up alongside of the car! *Move*—git a wiggle on you!"

Slowly, and with looks of utter astonishment on their faces, the six hold-up men did as they were told. As soon then as they were safely locked up in the Granite City jail and the bank owner had taken the stolen money from the car and returned it

to the bank, the whole town crowded around the sheriff.

"Well," said the sheriff, in answer to the volley of questions, "I took the *only chance* there was. According to my way of reasoning, two right turns will leave a man head back in the direction he has come from. I got your phone message and studied the thing out as I went along. So when I got to the point where the ranchers leave the new road and cut across to the old one, why I dragged some boards across the *new* road and propped up the old sign that had been left lying there from the time the new road was finished. The sign says, 'Take other road.' So I just set it up across the main road and left the trail over to the old one open. Then I started on and I was breaking the speed limit down in this direction along the road to Granite City when I saw the car full of men coming. I didn't have no real plan formed, except maybe to take down the signs at the cross roads so they would be sure to take the road to Slate Mountains—that being the one I had set up my boards across. But they were coming for that cross roads too fast. They sure burnt up the road!

"I gauged the distance and decided I would never make it in time to do any changing on that mile post and direction sign that they have there—so I just shut my eyes and headed straight for the post itself. The fel-

lows," continued the sheriff, "thought their lights had blinded me. After asking me the road they went on. So that first turn to the right they made in taking the mountain road put them at right angles to the direction they had been traveling. Then when they turned off the main road, that made another right-angle swing by the time they had reached the road above. That put them on the old upper road back to Granite City—which isn't in use along that part of it because the ranchers cut through and use the *new* road. The road not being in regular use, they didn't meet nobody they could question. And the road had twisted and turned so much already that I figured they would have pretty well lost their sense of direction by then—as you see they had. So they just come a hellin' it right back to the place they started from. But look how I'm a talkin'," the sheriff ended, "and I'm so dry my insides is dusty."

The banker, who had been waiting to get a word in for half an hour, stepped forward then. "You and the crowd come up to the drug store, sheriff," he interrupted heartily. "There's only a soda fount there, but the drug store's run by Doc Whitaker, who is a stockholder and director in this bank whose money you saved. And in such a case as this there's no telling what he'll prescribe, anyhow the drinks for everybody are on me!"

COLT FODDER

By EUGENE R. DUTCHER

*On the crest of Boot Hill they met. Across
an empty grave they settled
a bitter score!*

Another feature story for the December GOLDEN WEST.
On sale about November 5th.

Cowboy Strategy

By BILL ROSCOE

The clue that trailed a killer

IT ALL happened in the twinkling of an eye; so quickly that Jim Garmon had no time to think or act, and that Lew Rogers doubtless never knew he was hit. Coming from the Day-and-Night Saloon they started toward the single hotel of the little cowtown. Along the dusty unpaved street, lights still glowed in spite of the lateness of the hour. The whining squeak of a fiddle rose and fell. Now and then a door would slam or a laugh break jarringly on the stillness.

Then of a sudden a red jet of fire flashed from the darkness between two buildings and a gunshot echoed hollowly up and down the street. As it did Lew Rogers crumpled to the ground with his face showing putty-white in the gloom.

A man who had been traveling the opposite side of the street paused rigidly. Then as no more shots were fired, he started toward the two. While crossing the street he spied a head peering from a saloon doorway and he called loudly to the onlooker that a man had been shot. Other doors began to open. Boot heels clicked along the walk in the direction of the sound and immediately a crowd collected.

Someone suggested getting the sheriff, and a man started. But before he had gone a dozen paces, a heavy set, capable-appearing man pushed his way through the crowd. It was Clint Altan, the sheriff, and he immediately took charge of the situation. Bending over Rogers the sheriff briefly but carefully examined the

bullet mark in his side; then felt of his chest. "Humph, he was dead the moment that lead hit him," Altan said soberly. "Where did the shot come from and who did it?" he added.

Garman pointed to the nearby slot of blackness between the two buildings, his deeply tanned face gray almost as that of the fallen man. "I don't know. When we got opposite this dark place somebody shot," Garmon said dully. Coming out of the daze of surprise in which the thing had gripped him, he straightened to his full lean puncher-garbed height and started toward the opening, eyes blazing and hand on gun butt.

"Not so fast. Whoever it was ain't still standin' there. And if they were that'd be all the more reason for not rushin' in," Altan cautioned. But at Garmon's impatient growl the sheriff himself stepped quickly forward, and traveled the length of the dark alleyway. Assured that it was empty, he struck a match and stared about. The light showed merely a narrow lane between the two walls. Behind the buildings was the town wagon lot and hitching place; and in order to make it more easily reached afoot from the street the passage had been left open and a rough plank walk laid through it. Continuing along this walk to the rear Altan made a hasty survey of the lot and returned.

"See," said the sheriff, "I'm anxious as yuh are to get the man that did it. But as yuh know there's all sorts of people in this town; cowboys, ranchers, merchants and so on. Cat-

tleman with every size drove regularly bring their stock here to sell; and ranchers, and meat buyers come to buy or bargain. And for all the lead we've got any man in town might have done the shootin'. I knew Rogers right well, and know that his business was buyin' likely stock for the Circle Y. Did he have any enemies?" the sheriff asked.

"Not that I know of," Garmon said. "I've only known him during the eight or nine months he's been with the Circle Y where I work, and he didn't talk much about himself. All I know is that he was straight as a string, and a good judge of cattle. I come in town this afternoon to spend some of my pay and hunted up Rogers to have company. We knocked around together till just now, and was starting to call it an evening and to go to the hotel when this thing happened," Garmon explained.

A TEAM was secured, and the blanketed figure of Lew Rogers was sent to the ranch. And inside the Day-and-Night Saloon the sheriff began a process of questioning. But no one besides Jim Garmon and the man who had seen the shot from across the street appeared to know anything about the killing, and after a short time the sheriff gave up. "All right, all right. I don't guess nobody did it," he rasped, dismissing the listeners with a wave of his hand.

"Yuh heard what was said," Altan grunted, pausing beside Garmon. "What I'm goin' t' do now is act like I've forgotten the matter and start nosin' around every doubtful cabin and corner in town to see what I can uncover. Yuh havin' been with Rogers I don't think yuh'd better go with me; as that'd show we were still on a hunt for the killer. I want yuh to stay in town till mornin' though—and if I was yuh I'd keep out of dark places tonight," the sheriff added significantly.

A minute later Jim Garmon found himself alone, and he turned and made his way slowly toward the little nearby hotel. Although he would gladly have taken the risk of spending the balance of the night in searching for Lew Rogers' killer, Garmon felt that for the time it was useless. If whoever had done the shooting were going to leave town they would already have done so. Or, if they were still there, they would likely remain through the night.

Next morning Jim Garmon was up early for a closer survey of the scene of the killing. Beginning at the front of the alley he studied the space from end to end. But there was nothing more to be seen by daylight than on the night before. Whoever had done the shooting had doubtless stood on the plank walk that ran from front to back between the buildings; and where the walk ended at the rear there was such a mingling of tracks there was no way of telling one from another.

The walk itself was laid flat on the dirt, only the thickness of the four-by-four sills raising it off the ground. A space of some two inches had been left between each of the rough planks and beneath the walk was a scattering of old cigarette butts, scraps of paper and so on. Stooping, Garmon scanned these spaces closely. But seeing that the rubbish was dusted over with the scrape of many feet upon the boards he was just on the point of turning away when his gaze was attracted by a small reddish piece of dried mud.

The fact that the mud was still solid and unmixed with the surrounding blackish earth showed it had dropped there lately; and drawing it out, Garmon regarded the mud curiously. Finally putting it carefully in his pocket, he turned and made his way toward the town's single eating house—a one-story board shack between two saloons. A number of men were already in the place when he en-

tered. But as they were all strangers Garmon seated himself at an empty table and gave his order. Then with the bit of mud still on his mind he began to scan the feet of the different men. Several pairs of boots were inspected and passed. But of a sudden he stiffened tensely. Facing him only two tables away sat an impassive-faced, puncher-clad figure. And in the half casual glance Garmon had bent on the stranger's boots he had seen several small clots of dried reddish mud along their sides!

In a swift spasm of fury Jim Garmon's hand started toward the big .45 holstered against his right leg, then paused, a puzzled look on his face. Hurriedly finishing his breakfast he went out and hunted up Sheriff Altan. In a few words Garmon told of his discovery of the mud and of the muddy boots that matched it. As Garmon ended a growl of wrath issued from Altan's throat; and with a hitch at his gun belt he started toward the lunch room.

But Garmon held back. "Just a minute, sheriff," he said quietly. "There's a number of points not clear in my mind yet, which I think we ought to consider before you do any open accusing. Why not just drop in for a cup of coffee and seat yourself at that feller's table and see what you can learn about him first. Then we'll check up on what he says."

The sheriff hesitated; but nodded a little reluctantly. When he came out of the building some minutes later, however, Clint Altan did not look nearly so determined as upon entering. "He tells a straight enough story," the sheriff explained in considerable puzzlement. "Says his name is Burson and that he's bringing a herd of cows in town to sell. He says that he come on ahead to make arrangements about it. And he claims to have been in the saloon durin' the time the shootin' occurred. Come on

and we'll see if that's so," the sheriff ended.

But a few minutes questioning brought the two up against a blank wall of facts. Both the owner of the saloon and the bartender on duty at the time stated positively that Burson had been in the saloon before and during the shooting.

"He did it—and yet he didn't!" the sheriff snapped, as Jim Garmon eyed him questioningly. "Anyhow I'm going to find Burson and do some pointed talkin' to him right away. As yet I haven't for a minute let on that I had any thought it might have been him.

But while they had pursued their investigations Garmon too had been thinking—and for a second time he hesitated cautiously. "I wouldn't do that if I were you, sheriff," Garmon objected. "You know what we've learned from the owner and bartender of the Day-and-Night shows Burson actually *was* in the saloon at the time of the shooting."

STEPPING closer and lowering his voice Jim Garmon talked rapidly and earnestly for some minutes. And as he listened the expression on Clint Altan's face slowly changed from doubt to amazement, then conviction. Presently he nodded. "Wait at my office and I'll be with yuh soon," the sheriff directed. Turning, he made his way slowly down the street, pausing here and there to chat with passers-by.

Shortly thereafter the sheriff mounted his horse and left town headed toward the Circle Y; and Jim Garmon once more strolled up the street. Leaning against the front of a building, he rolled a cigarette and watched the sheriff go. Half an hour passed. Then still watching with the same seeming indifference Garmon noted that Burson was leaving; but in a different route from Altan.

A few minutes later just as the low-

ering sun was reflecting in fiery colors from the few western facing glass windows of the town, Garmon secured his horse and took his departure also—and in the same direction that Burson had taken.

Apparently Burson had a route of his own in mind. For after following the road some distance in the gathering blue-gray twilight he left it and struck off through the thickets of scrub oak and pine, straight toward the steadily rising foothills. And near enough not to lose the other, yet taking care not to be seen himself, Jim Garmon followed.

Minutes passed into an hour; and darkness settled over the land.

For some time the darkness held, black and brooding. Then the gleam of a camp fire became visible; and beside it sat a man. Pausing at a safe distance Burson hallowed warningly. "It's me, Malard," Burson added quickly as he saw the right hand of the man at the fire leap to his holstered gun.

After being sure his identity was recognized, Burson advanced. As he did, the figure by the fire rose and faced him eagerly. He was a tall, bony-framed man. And when he turned toward Burson his lean-jawed unshaven face showed intent and animal-like in the yellow glow of the camp-fire. "Well?" Malard asked—and the single word carried a vast amount of meaning.

"It's all right I guess," Burson replied surlily. "The sheriff was easy enough. He prowled around last night and all day today, without once getting close to the right scent. That feller that was with Rogers is smooth as gun oil though. He didn't say much; but he hung about all day and was still in town when I left; and I don't know what he suspects. I was mighty relieved this afternoon when the sheriff told me he had a hot clue, and got his horse and headed toward the Circle Y. I don't see why I had to stay

there anyhow—since it was *you* that killed Rogers," Burson added.

"I told you why," Malard snarled. "How were we goin' to know what developments had taken place if we both lit out and come away? Somebody had to be there and keep tab on the thing. And what risk did yuh run settin' in the saloon right in sight of a dozen men all the time? As for killin' Rogers yuh know blame well why I did that. How else could we have run these stolen cows we got back up the canyon into town and sold them, with him there as a cattle buyer—and from way down where we rustled the cows? It was lucky enough I recognized him in that crowded saloon and stepped out unobserved and waited for him, after havin' yuh learn his business."

"Guess that's so. Anyway it turned out all right as it stands," Burson replied grudgingly.

"It sure did, feller. *It sure did!*" a steely voice agreed from the darkness.

FOR a second a tense, suspense-filled silence held. Then with guttural oaths both men whirled—their hands dropping to their hips.

From the tone and the dimly seen figure and features, Burson recognized the newcomer as Jim Garmon. And even as his own gun snapped to a rigid level, his voice rose shrilly. "It's him, Malard. It's Garmon, the feller that was with Rogers!"

Instantly, sharp and vibrant Jim Garmon's voice cut in. "Keep your hands off your guns! I've got you covered—"

Simultaneously a reddish-yellow tongue of flame licked from Burson's gun and the sharp bang of the report broke shatteringly in the stillness. This was immediately followed by a second flash and crash from Jim Garmon's weapon. Then came a hoarse cry of pain from Burson and he crumpled to the ground. Mingling with this rose

a bellow of rage and alarm from Malard, telling he had understood Burson's message. Hurriedly raising his gun he fired once—twice. Then whirling swiftly he sprang away into the darkness, down a muddy slope toward a stream below the camp.

Knowing that this was the man he wanted, Jim Garmon followed. For a moment he found himself half blinded by the sudden turn from the firelight to darkness. But guessing this would also be the case with Malard, Garmon plunged blindly forward in the direction the other had taken.

Sensing that he was about to be overtaken Malard suddenly paused and turned like a flash. Dimly Garmon saw the gun in Malard's hand snap up—and Garmon leaped forward. As he did so Malard's gun roared not five feet distant—missed—and the two men met. For a space they remained upright; then locked in steely grips they pitched to the earth. Malard struggled with the fierce fury of a trapped animal, trying savagely to turn his gun on Garmon. But in the first clench Jim Garmon's hand had closed securely on Malard's gun arm. And now in spite of Malard's more than equal size he found himself no match for Garmon's sinewy muscles and iron determination. Slowly and relentlessly Garmon bent and twisted the arm that held the pistol, further inch by inch. And of a sudden it was over. With a curse of pain Malard released the gun. "Let go! I give up!" he snarled.

Getting warily to his feet, Garmon kicked the other's gun into the darkness; and with his hand on the butt of his own weapon he motioned Malard up. "Now we'll get Burson and start back to town. Then after somebody returns them rustled cows back to their proper owner, this thing'll be in a fair way to being settled," Garmon said.

A few moments walk brought them

once more to the camp fire, by which Burson lay writhing and groaning. Keeping one eye on Molard, Garmon stooped and examined the other; then grunted. "You're not as bad hurt as you think you are. That bullet only slanted through your chest muscles on one side instead of going straight in as you probably thought. The sooner we get you to town the better though. And we're starting now, so get up."

For some seconds Malard held a sullen silence as the three started for their horses. Then his curiosity got the better of him. "I guess yuh heard all we said just now—so I ain't denyin' nothin'. But will yuh kindly tell me how in blazes yuh got onto us?" he asked.

Garmon nodded. "Sure, I don't mind telling; and I'll admit both me and the sheriff was stumped for a while. Finally though I found a little piece of mud under the walk where the shot was fired from. And at breakfast I noticed that Burson had some of the same color dirt on his boots. Meeting the sheriff I told him of my discovery and it seemed to him like a good lead; but after investigating and learning positively that Burson was in the saloon during the shooting it seemed only to complicate things more. Then of a sudden the truth occurred to me, which was that while Burson hadn't actually done the shooting he was a pard of the man that had. The next thing to do was to find Burson's pard. And I figured the best way to do that was to let Burson think somebody else was suspected—then follow him when he left town. So the sheriff swore me in as a deputy and left, while I stayed to watch Burson. Simple enough, wasn't it?" Garmon added, as the horses loomed suddenly through the night.

For answer Malard swore in explosive amazement; then lapsed into a guilty silence.

Black Bishop's Last Draw

By IRVE LANE

An old time stage-bandit packs a brace of six-guns, then puts them into the discard

SHERIFFS and other peace officers breathed a sigh of relief when the prison gates clanged shut on Black Bishop, last of the Clinton gang. The most dangerous gunman the West had ever known would never draw a gun again, they said. But for once the officers of the law were wrong.

It was nearly eighteen years later that Black Bishop slowly walked into the warden's office to receive the governor's pardon. The warden handed him a heavily stamped paper. For a moment the warden was silent, studying the tall figure now slightly bent, the hair greying at the temples. Then he coughed. "You've been a model prisoner, Bishop. Some of the guards here sort of took up a little collection for you." And he handed Bishop a small roll of bills.

"That's mighty white of them, warden." Black Bishop hesitated. "Will you shake hands, warden?" Gravely the warden extended his hand.

At the little desert town of Three Points Bishop bought a prospector's outfit that took the last of his funds. He had nearly completed his purchases when his eyes fell upon a tray of weapons. "Too new fangled for me, son," Bishop told the clerk as he fingered the guns. "They don't make guns like they used to any more."

"Say, I think there's a pair of old Colts lying around here somewhere." The clerk rummaged beneath the counter. "Here they are." And before

Bishop he placed two huge, old fashioned Colt .045's.

Almost reverently Black Bishop picked up and hefted the Colts. He twirled the cylinders, squinted through the sights. Then breaking open a box of cartridges he loaded the weapons. "I'll take these, bub," he said to the waiting clerk, slipping the great .045's into shoulder holsters. "Is there any place around here where I could get a mite of liquor?"

"Going on a spree, dad?" was the laughing response. "Well, I guess Daly's speakeasy will fix you up. But it's a bad joint though..

"No spree for me, son" replied the older man good-naturedly. "Out in the desert it comes in pretty handy. Thanks for the tip." He shouldered his pack and moved down the street till he came to Daly's Soft Drink Parlor. A tough-looking individual glanced sharply at Bishop then admitted him into a crowded rear room.

At one end of the room a crap game was in progress. Nearby three shifty-eyed gamblers played poker with a young rancher who became more flushed and excited as he steadily lost. At the bar Bishop exchanged his last dollar for a pint of pale moonshine.

He turned to go and paused at the table where the poker game was in progress. Suddenly the young rancher dashed his cards into the face of the dealer. "Why—you've been using a cold deck, you crooked shark!" he shouted and drove his fist full into the

other's jaw. The dealer crashed to the floor, overturning the table as he fell.

Like a flash one of the dealer's partners was on his feet, his hand darting for the butt of the small gun protruding from his vest pocket. Midway his hand faltered, the black muzzle of Bishop's great .045 was steadily trained on him.

Bishop laughed harshly, every man in the room felt a cold chill sweep over him. Never for an instant taking his eyes off the gamblers, Bishop addressed the rancher. "Take what money's coming to you and wait outside for me. Take my pack along while you're at it." Quickly the other picked up the scattered bills on the floor, rapidly counted them, and stuffed the bills into his pocket. Grabbing Bishop's pack, he gave the gamblers a defiant look and left the room. Slowly Bishop backed out after him. Outside he found the rancher mounted on a horse and holding another by the reins.

"**W**E'D better get out of here quick," urged the young rancher. "That Daly crowd is bad. This horse belongs to Ed Snell. Snell is a friend of mine and won't mind my borrowing it."

Rapidly they galloped down the road. Bishop studied the face of his companion. Good looking, but a trifle weak, he decided. His reverie was interrupted by his companion speaking. "I've got a small place about fifteen miles from town," the rancher told Bishop. "My name's Larry Clemens. What's yours? Sam Bishop? Hold on a minute, that sounds familiar. No, it's slipped my mind."

For a while they rode on in silence, then Larry Clemens spoke again. "I've been noticing that pack of yours, Mr. Bishop. You're a prospector if I ain't mistaken. Why don't you put up at my place and do some prospecting around here?"

Bishop looked at his companion in surprise. "That's pretty fine of you, son. I'll only be too glad to take you up on that offer."

It was a three hours' ride before they reached the log cabin that spelled home for the rancher. It was dark when the younger of the two swung open the door of the cabin and admitted Bishop.

Later, over a somewhat scanty meal Larry Clemens talked about himself. He had a small herd of cattle which he tended himself.

The following days Bishop prospected the nearby streams. Some thin specks of gold he found, but he knew that the precious metal would never be found in paying quantities in that part of the country. He was beginning to rack his mind for some excuse to leave the kindly rancher when he made his great discovery.

It was on the fifth day of his stay that Larry Clemens galloped up to where Bishop was kneeling by one of the streams. Young Clemens dismounted and addressed the older man. "Any luck?" he asked tying the reins of his horse to a convenient tree.

"Say, son, does this land we're on belong to you?" he questioned, as he puffed on his pipe.

"Every inch of it," was the prompt answer. "But what's the idea of all this mystery?"

"It's the biggest thing you or I will ever lay our eyes on. Son, this land of yours is soaked with the biggest oil deposit found since the first Oklahoma gusher was brought in."

Oil! The magic word flashed throughout the West. Oil had been found on the Clemens' ranch near Three Points.

A city of tents and shacks sprang up. The boom town was wide open. Speakeasies and gambling dens openly plied their business. The sheriff and his deputies collected toll on every case of moonshine that entered the town. At night there were riotous

evenings at the dance halls. And it was a rare morning that did not find another unexplained murder.

Followed days of unremitting toil for Black Bishop. Under his supervision derricks were erected, storage tanks built. It was cruel and back-breaking labor, but the oil must be gotten out of the ground before the neighboring landowners drained the oil from the soil. It was Bishop who induced the bankers to finance the building of the derricks and tanks, Bishop who negotiated with the oil company for the leasing of the oil wells.

At Three Points various cliques of the underworld looked at Clemens and marked him for their own. Fat pickings that would soon be ripe for the plucking they thought. But it was three shady characters from Chicago that made the first attempt to trap the young rancher.

"There goes the three most dangerous gunmen in Chicago," was what certain lords of the underworld said to each other of Al Cicero, Dandy Davis, and Big Joe Larson. Temporarily they were in hiding following a disastrous attempt to hold up an armoured payroll car, Coke fiends, dead shots with the automatic, the trio were as deadly as rattlesnakes.

OUT on the ranch, work went on with unceasing activity. The first derrick had gone up, for days the drillers had bored into the earth. Finally the great moment had come. An engineer had pressed down upon a little plunger, there had come a loud rumbling from the ground and a great column of oil gushed up from the ground. "At least a thousand barrels a day," the engineers assured Bishop.

It was night and Black Bishop walked the streets of the boom town. A busy day indeed it had been for him, and a fortunate one for Larry

Clemens. The lease for the wells had been signed with the agent of the oil company. Clemens had received one hundred thousand dollars in cash and had been guaranteed ten per cent of the output.

"Bishop!" A voice called and Bishop turned as a hand clutched his arm. "This is Ed Snell, Mr. Bishop. They've got Larry drunk in Daly's. He's cashed the check he got from the oil company and he's there now flashing his roll. And that bunch of gunmen from Chicago will pick him clean if they're not stopped."

"Thanks, son, I'll take care of this." For an instant a crooked smile played over his lips. A strange light had come into his eyes. Unconsciously he flexed and unflexed his hands. With Snell at his side he went in the direction of Daly's.

The place was packed with the riff-raff of the camp as Black Bishop entered Daly's. None noticed his entrance, all eyes were fixed on Clemens at one of the rear tables. Before the rancher was an enormous pile of bills, gazing at the money with eager eyes were the three gunmen from Chicago.

Slowly Bishop moved to Clemens' side. Without a word he picked up the bills and handed them to Snell. The three gunmen arose, kicking back their chairs.

"Who asked you to butt in on this," asked Cicero glaring at Bishop. His hand strayed for his hip pocket.

The light in Bishop's eyes brightened. Contemptuously he looked at the gunmen. "Just three rats out of a sewer," he replied and spat into Cicero's face. The gunmen reached for their guns.

The room was filled with the flash and roar of the guns as everyone ducked for safety. If the gunmen were swift, Bishop was a lightning with his great .045's. One moment his hands had been empty, in a fraction of a second his Colts were in his hands, blazing death.

WHO MURDERED BENSEN?



Police baffled to find murderer who shot and killed Bensen in cold blood. Ten acquaintances of Bensen being held. According to Janitor's clue, the mysterious stranger seen leaving Bensen's room was bald. Five of Bensen's friends were found to be bald. Janitor then disclosed that murderer had a mustache. Six of the men have mustaches. Janitor adds that visitor's right ear was missing, that he had a scar on the left cheek and that he wore nose glasses. Three of the suspects were found to have an ear missing, four of them have a scar and three of them wear glasses. The man who committed the crime has all of the characteristics mentioned by the Janitor. Can you find him?



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Dandy Davis fell with three slugs in his body. Big Joe Larson died before his hand touched his gun. Twice Cicero's gun spat fire before he slumped to the floor with a bullet in his heart.

"Gawd A'Mighty," whispered a hanger-on of the camp, gazing in awe at Black Bishop, standing and looking at a flesh wound in his arm and then at a hole in the wall nearby.

The shooting had aroused Larry Clemens from his drunken daze. "You're not hurt, are you," he asked anxiously as Bishop bound up his wound with a handkerchief.

"No, son, this is just a flea bite. Here, Snell, take these Colts and keep them for souvenirs. Any time I can't shoot fast enough to keep from being hit it's time for me to stop using guns."

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of the GOLDEN WEST MAGAZINE, published monthly at Springfield, Massachusetts, for October 1, 1930. State of New York, County of New York:—Before me, a Notary in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared J. Thomas Wood, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Owner of THE GOLDEN WEST MAGAZINE and that the following, is to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher—J. Thomas Wood, 25 West 43rd St., New York, N. Y.; Editor—J. Thomas Wood, 25 West 43rd St., New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor—None; Business Manager—None.

2. That the owner is: J. Thomas Wood, 25 West 43rd St., New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

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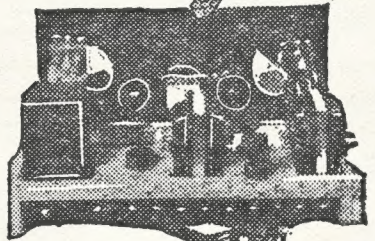
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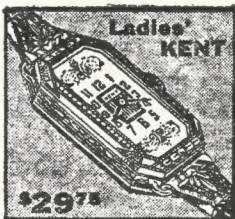
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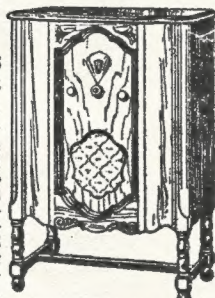
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